

# Believe It Or Not

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## Opening Words (#657 - Sophia Lyon Fahs)

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

*Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.*

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.

*Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.*

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

*Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.*

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

*Other beliefs are like gateways opening wider vistas for exploration.*

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

*Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.*

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

*Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.*

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## Readings

#1: A piece of dialogue from a science fiction novel by Orson Scott Card entitled *Shadow of the Hegemon*:

"...I don't know a soul who doesn't maintain two separate lists of doctrines—the ones that they *believe* that they believe; and the ones that they actually try to live by. I'm simply one of the rare ones who knows the difference. You, my boy, are not."

"Because I don't believe in any doctrines," [he replied].

"That...is proof positive of my assertion. You are so convinced that you believe only what you *believe* that you believe, that you remain utterly blind to what you *really* believe without believing you believe it."

#2: A description of the death of Michael Servetus for heresy from *Out of the Flames* by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone.

*On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was led to the stake. Even now, his enemies would not leave him alone. Every step of the way, Farel [one of the clergy who had condemned him] walked next to him, whispering in his ear, urging him to confess his errors and be*

*spared the flames. Servetus prayed silently in reply. Finally, they arrived at the hill at Champel, with its stake and pile of green wood. Servetus was seated; an iron chain was wrapped around his body and a thick rope wound several times around his neck. The crown of straw and leaves and sulphur was placed on his head, and his book was lashed to his arm. The fire was lit. Servetus shrieked. At the end of the half hour[!] that it took him to die, he was heard to moan, "Oh Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!"*

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What do Unitarian Universalists believe?

That's a fair question, if not always a welcome one. In casual conversation, when we ask someone about their religious tradition, we are usually looking for a thumbnail description of the common beliefs that hold them together.

If you look in the dictionary under the various entries for different religions, almost all of the definitions include a unifying doctrine or doctrines that help to describe, however generally, the *beliefs* of people who practice that religion. (You're all going to check that out, right? Try and find one that doesn't?) Let's go alphabetically through a few quick examples, summarized with the help of the online edition of the American Heritage Dictionary:

### **Bud·dhism**

Acceptance of, belief in, the teaching of the Buddha that life is permeated with suffering caused by desire, that suffering ceases when desire ceases, and that enlightenment releases one from desire.

### **Hin·du·ism**

Belief in reincarnation, acceptance of the view that opposing theories are aspects of one eternal truth, belief in earthly evils from which we seek to liberate ourselves.

### **Is·lam**

Belief in the need for submission to God and in Muhammad as the chief and last prophet of God.

### **Ju·da·ism**

Belief in the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud as the primary source for spiritual and ethical principles and in the importance of carrying on traditional ceremonies and rites.

Ok, let's wrap this up with our old friend in the Z's:

### **Zo·ro·as·tri·an·ism**

Belief that there is a universal struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

So, okay, given those, what *is* Unitarian Universalism?

I know, I know, you can argue that religions should not necessarily be defined by beliefs. Actions speak louder than words. Mystic religious experience promises to go beyond what can be formulated and codified in a belief system to a reality that cannot be captured in text. Reason, the scientific method, and many religious teachers themselves call us to be always open to new information, new experience, further study and reflection and revelation, rather than to chain ourselves to past understandings.

But that's a mouthful that doesn't say a whole lot to the people who are looking for an answer to their question. *Practically speaking*, when people see your Unitarian Universalist T-shirt or bumper sticker or button and ask, "What are *Unitarian Universalists*?" they want to know something about *what we believe*...And that's what makes it so difficult, right?

There are various unsatisfactory ways to answer this, and I've tried most of them.

One is to say, "Well, I can't speak for *all* Unitarian Universalists, but what *I* believe is..." This is a helpful distinction, possibly, but it doesn't answer the question that was asked. The questioners didn't express interest in my personal credo, as profound and perceptive as it may be...or *not*. They asked for some insight into Unitarian Universalism. And all they've learned is that I can't speak for Unitarian Universalists...back to square one.

Another tactic is to supply history for beliefs. "Well, we came out of the Christian tradition, and got our name from two distinct beliefs that were regarded as heresy in orthodox Christianity..." And, by the time we get to the merger in 1961, the questioners have either fled or are summoning up all of their politeness just to keep their eyes open. They don't want to know what we *were*, but what we *are*.

Letting go of history, we may instead talk about sweeping generalities under the guise of beliefs: love and peace and treating people fairly. These are all fine things, don't get me wrong; they are vitally important, but in terms of the question put to us, these values hardly serve to distinguish us from any other religious tradition and so leave the questioners not much more knowledgeable about Unitarian Universalism than when they started.

So, in order to be a little more specific, we may fudge a little and talk about our seven principles as a sort of stand-in for a creed. "We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person...We believe in respecting the interdependent web of all existence." It's tempting to do this. It gets around so many explanations...but it's not accurate. We are not bound, as individuals, to believe these principles, nor to profess beliefs of any kind. A little further on in the document, it says, *Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages.*

Drat! Foiled again.

It struck me, halfway through this sermon (sometimes I'm so slow!) that, though I'd looked up a dozen other religions in the dictionary, I had not yet looked up Unitarian Universalism. Certainly, if I'm looking for a concise, well-worded description to give to people, the dictionary should be helpful. Well, you decide. This is what I found under:

## **Unitarian Universalism**

### **NOUN:**

A religious association of Christian origin that has no official creed and that considers God to be unipersonal, salvation to be granted to the entire human race, and reason and conscience to be the criteria for belief and practice.

What do you think? I admit that I was somewhat disheartened that it fell into some of the same traps I have in the past. It begins with history ("of Christian origin") and then recounts beliefs from that history ("considers God to be unipersonal"—I love that word, *unipersonal*--and "salvation to be granted to the entire human race") as defining our movement. But are those really descriptive of us now? For some, certainly. The oneness of God and universal salvation still speak to many of us as important themes of our religious life...but for others, for other Unitarian Universalists, they are not relevant concepts. Important as they may be to our history, they don't necessarily speak to the Humanist, the Wiccan, the Buddhist in our midst. So: important concepts to our understanding of ourselves and our history? Yes! Helpful in defining present-day Unitarian Universalism?...not so much.

Even the last piece that says we consider "reason and conscience to be the criteria for belief and practice," though certainly descriptive of a conviction widely held among us, may be a little too sweeping as a definition of us all. There are those who believe that, by overestimating the powers of reason in religious matters, we have closed off other aspects of ourselves that allow us access to religious truths; that we need to dethrone reason so that we may open ourselves up to emotion, mysticism, intuition.

Maybe the most helpful piece of the dictionary definition of Unitarian Universalism is the assertion that we "have no official creed." That is undoubtedly true and something we can affirm without hesitation about the Unitarian Universalism of today.

Some UUs, in answering that curious questioner who wants to know about Unitarian Universalism, embrace this aspect of our tradition explicitly. Rather than deflecting the question by talking about their own beliefs, or taking a detour into the history of Unitarianism and/or Universalism, or disguising our principles as a creed, they speak directly to our "creedlessness." I want to talk specifically about two ways in which I've heard this expressed:

"You can believe anything you want."

And:

"It doesn't matter what you believe."

Taken in one way, and the way in which I think these comments are most often intended, these are wonderful invitations. We are saying, in effect, “Come, join us. We will not ask you to deny what it is that you believe; neither will we ask you to pay lip service to things which you honestly *don't* believe. We are an open, religious community welcoming free dialogue around varying beliefs and theologies. *It doesn't matter what you believe. You can believe anything you want.*”

That's the invitation.

But there other ways in which people might hear these statements. *It doesn't matter what you believe. You can believe anything you want.*

There is a popular conception of Unitarian Universalists as those people who don't believe anything. Because our community has no creed, it is thought that our members have no convictions. Because we do not insist on uniformity of belief, it is assumed that we find beliefs, *any* beliefs, optional.

Now, given that popular attitude, listen again: *It doesn't matter what you believe. You can believe anything you want.*

*It doesn't matter what you believe* might well be heard as *beliefs don't matter. You can believe anything you want* might be heard as, frankly, *whatever!*

Is that what we mean to say? Beliefs don't matter? Tell that to Michael Servetus, who we proudly claim in our heritage, who ended up being executed, burned alive, for his beliefs and his efforts to reform the beliefs of the church. Why did he care so much? Because he knew the power of what people believed and the dissonance created by trying to believe something that one could not honestly believe.

Understand: Servetus was no modern Unitarian Universalist, but a Christian of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who railed against the doctrine of the Trinity as unscriptural and harmful to the Christian church. “For as soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms, so that no kind of unity remains in our conception. But what else is being without God but being unable to think about God, when there is always presented to our understanding a haunting kind of confusion of three beings, by which we are forever deluded into supposing that we are thinking about God.” Continue demanding that people believe in this doctrine of the Trinity, he said in his writings, and you will drive them away from the real truths of Christianity.

Eventually, in the words of Orson Scott Card from the reading, people will reject what they *believe* they believe or what they believe they *should* believe, in favor of what they *really* believe. Beliefs matter... and they must correlate somehow with our experience and be able to find corroboration in our minds and be affirmed through our own understanding of the world around us.

It doesn't matter what we believe? It doesn't matter that we believe *alike*. “We need not think alike, to love alike,” says Frances David, our Unitarian ancestor from 16<sup>th</sup> century Transylvania. No, it doesn't matter that we believe alike. It doesn't matter that we believe what we're *supposed* to believe. It doesn't matter that we believe the principles or the prophets or the Pope...but let me state clearly, in the words of

the title to our Responsive Reading of this morning: *it matters what we believe!*

And I know that people will say, it really *doesn't* matter what we believe, it matters what we *do*...but where do our actions come from? What inspires and directs what we do? If there is a disconnect between our beliefs and our actions, it is maybe because, in the words of the reading, we are talking about what we *believe* that we believe, rather than what we really believe, without believing that we believe it. Our actions will *show* us what we believe, and, if you're like me, we are oftentimes challenged by the realization that what we *believe* we believe is not, after all, what we believe at all. Do not be discouraged. It is only by looking honestly at what we really do believe that our beliefs can change. And as our beliefs change, so can the effectiveness of our actions in the world.

Some beliefs are like walled gardens, other beliefs are expansive...some beliefs are like shadows, others like sunshine... some beliefs are divisive, others are bonds in a world community.... I think that so much of the racism and sexism and discrimination suffered throughout the world is the result of unexamined beliefs. We know what we *should* believe; we are clear on what we *believe* we believe. What do we really believe? What beliefs have we locked away because they don't fit with our conception of ourselves?

You see, because the question for me is not what we *want* to believe. You can believe anything you want? Not hardly. Though again I understand the intention of the statement in context, it is, taken separately, an impossible proposition. You *cannot* believe what you want. Try it sometime.

For instance: I *want* to believe that people are inherently good; that people, in their very nature, wish the best for each other at all times; that evil acts are an aberration. I *want* to believe that, but then I am faced with reports about the brutal rapes and violence in Darfur, stories of child abductions and abuse, accounts of corporate heads that, caught within the perpetual motion of gathering more and more profits, are brutally unmindful of the survival needs of indigenous people...all of these and more serve to challenge what I want to believe about people so that, right at the point that I am ready to affirm it, I have to ask myself, "Do I really believe that?" We cannot truly believe what we *want*; we can only believe what our experience, our searching, the challenge and ideas of others, all combined with our own honest reflection have led us to.

And we invite you, here, to examine your own beliefs in loving community; to separate what you believe you believe from what you believe; to share your understandings and listen to others; to find ways that you can actualize your beliefs in service to the world.

So here is my humble suggestion. The next time you are asked about Unitarian Universalism, say, yes, we are a creedless religious community, not because we don't think beliefs are important, but because we think beliefs are *so* important that no one can hand them to you at the door. That's my short version. Being a minister, I, of course, have a longer version. If they're still listening and interested, I'd say that beliefs cannot be entered into lightly nor can they be dispensed with easily; they are so important that they should not be mandated by any authority, religious or otherwise; they must arise from our own experience and understanding; they must grow from the very essence of who we are and who we are becoming; I'd say that we think beliefs are so important that they require our individual work and reflection, and we ask

that everyone find ways to share the fruits of their labors with the congregation. I'd say we support each other in the work of believing; we affirm and also lovingly challenge each other's beliefs; we are companions on the journey, but the beliefs are our own, and, because we see beliefs as open to change, the work is ongoing.

Some beliefs are rigid, writes Sophia Fahs, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

*Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.*

May our beliefs grow ever upward.