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Who should not be a Unitarian Universalist?

Cache Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Logan, Utah

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Unitarian Universalism - Where all your answers are questioned.

For a UU, a "tradition" is something that was done last year, and a "firmly established tradition" is something that has been done for the past two years. If it has been done for the last three years, it is "the way we've always done it."

Two people were discussing their dissatisfactions with some aspect of the church they both attended. Suddenly, one of them asked, "Well, what do the Unitarians Universalists believe in?" Without a pause, the other replied, "Recycling!"

Now I'll tell you a story that really happened at a UU Sunday school. The Kindergarten class was discussing "prayer", and the children seemed aware that the way you end a prayer was with "amen." Does anyone know what "amen" means, the teacher asked. There was a long silence. Then one little boy piped up, with appropriate, computer-age gestures, and said, "Well, I think it means, like, "send".

A coworker finally got fed up with my responses to his tirade about the way things should be. Raising his voice he said, "Do you know what's going to happen when you stand in judgment before God?" I responded, "She is going to have some big explaining to do."

Universalists believed that God was too good to damn people, while Unitarians believed that they were too good to be damned.

UUs are basically good people, who, for the most part, try to live by the 10 suggestions.

To any of you who are new to our church today, I feel it is important to let you know what we Unitarian Universalists are like and what we expect.

- We are friendly. If you are not friendly, out you go!
- We are genuine people. Even our phonies are real phonies.
- We are always sincere even if we have to fake it.
- We aren't sure how ambivalent we should be.
- We believe in tolerance and cannot stand intolerant people.
- We are optimists. Anyone who doesn't look on the bright side depresses us.
- We are more non-competitive than other groups.
- We believe in equality; everyone is as good as the next person and a whole lot better.
- Every Unitarian Universalist is a feminist, so he has to watch his language.
- The organization is run democratically because the president insists on it.
- We have our critics, but they are paranoid.
- We are prompt about being late to meetings.

- ☐ Dogmatism is absolutely forbidden.
 - ☐ Freedom of belief is rigidly enforced.
 - ☐ And, on behalf of this joyful congregation, we welcome you.
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It is wonderful to have humor. I wouldn't want to live without it. But what does our humor say about us?

We live by the 10 suggestions
All our answers will be questioned
We don't agree on much, except recycling
We can't stand intolerance
Our traditions are flexible

For years I said that be UU is easy, you can believe in anything. From the outside looking in, we appear to be saying that anyone can get into this church. We infer that anyone is welcome here. Over the years, though, as I have become more engaged in this church, the theology this church allows me to explore, and especially this congregation, I've become more proud and more protective of the responsibilities of membership. I don't believe everyone is welcome here.

Dr. Tony Larsen, a UU minister with a long history of service to this church (Boston, Massachusetts; Racine, Wisconsin), has identified four criterion for who should not be allowed in to this church. My comments today are based on his sermon, with liberal paraphrasing.

The First criterion is not knowing how to sin. You should not be a UU if you don't know how to sin. Not everyone knows how to do it. We don't want people here who have no understanding of how to do wicked things. We don't want people here who are holier than thou. We don't want people who have already made it in the salvation department. People with too much heaven in them are hell to live with. To be able to recognize our potential for evil has great power for mobilizing compassion. Sometimes those with first hand knowledge of sin are more tolerant of the human condition. They react with compassion rather than self-righteousness, with understanding instead of judgment. You don't need to perform evil acts. We're just asking you to recognize the potential in yourself. It'll do wonders for your tolerance of others' shortcomings.

The **second criterion** has to do with our intolerance of intolerance. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you support the Nazis, the KKK, are a religious fundamentalists who has no room for other ways of thinking, or any other group that believes in oppressing people. We may be open in this church, but we're not that open. We are closed to movements or groups that close people

off. And when we say our church has freedom of belief, we mean that in a limited way. You are free to believe whatever you want here but only as long as it helps you live a caring and humane life. That's a very real limitation on freedom of belief. So when someone says, "*What do Unitarian Universalists believe?*" and you answer, "*Oh, we believe whatever we want to.*" - that's not quite true. There are a lot of things we do not believe in.

-We don't believe in limiting people because of their ethnicity or color.

-We don't believe in restricting people on the basis of gender.

-We don't believe in excluding people because of disability.

-We don't believe in denying rights to those whose personal preference or lifestyle is not considered mainstream, so long as that lifestyle doesn't infringe on other people's rights.

-We don't believe in destroying the environment.

-We don't believe that injustice and poverty are just unfortunate accidents.

-We do believe we have a responsibility to do something about these unfair situations.

There are some very definite limitations on freedom of belief in this church.

If the Unitarian Universalists have a creed, it's an ethical creed, with the doctrines only vaguely implied, if at all. Our principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association have words like: "*justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*",

"acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth",

"affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person", and

that we have "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

We don't have words like, "the Holy Ghost," "born of the Virgin Mary," and "the only begotten son of the father." We don't care if you believe in these words as long as whatever you believe helps you live a humane life.

-If believing in God helps you be a better person then fine, we encourage your belief.

-If being an atheist helps you take more responsibility for creating a better world then fine, we encourage your atheism.

The only beliefs we don't want you to have in this church are the ones that lead you to hurt people.

And, other than the obvious ones, I can't tell you what the bad beliefs are, because sometimes the same beliefs do different things for different people.

With this in mind, Reverend Larsen offers us a story about a woman who came to her minister. *"Reverend," she sobbed, "something has to be done about my husband. He doesn't help with the children. He doesn't come home at night. Instead he's gallivanting all over town, gambling, drinking, running after women."* *"You have my deepest sympathy,"* commiserated the minister. *"Your husband is a miserable sinner."* *"A sinner he is, reverend,"* the woman said, *"but miserable, no he ain't. He's having the time of his life."* I'm not going to say that you should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you gamble, drink, and run after women, or men, but, if that is all you believe in, or if someone else must bear the burden of your actions, you shouldn't feel so comfortable here. We expect a lot more than that.

The **third criterion**: You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you expect the person at this lectern to always share your views or to avoid saying things that make you uncomfortable. This is part of the concept of the **FREE PULPIT/FREE PEW**. **This is both an amazingly simple and complex concept. It addresses, not only our rights in this church, but also our responsibilities both inside and outside its walls.** To allow all members of this church the free search for truth, the pulpit must be free. When the congregation of this church, meaning you, allows me to address you from this lectern, you allow me the freedom to present from my personal knowledge and experience. In return, I have the responsibility to respect the trust of this congregation by speaking responsibly from genuine conviction. In logical progression, is the concept of the **FREE PEW**. Unitarian Universalism does not regulate thoughts or beliefs. Individuals are free to pursue their own truth and theology. The concept of the **Free Pew** protects the congregation against religious oppression by preserving both individual and collective rights to speak, to communicate and obtain knowledge in the pursuit of truth. To that end, the **Free Pew calls all to act actively and visibly to protect the rights of others** to think and believe freely, and especially protect those with whom we disagree. This creates a bond within the community that transcends differences created by creeds, doctrines or beliefs and preserves the covenant. When I closely examined the concept of the FREE PULPIT/FREE PEW, I realized that this is the core of what allows us to be the church of the open mind. It is no little commitment. It is one of the, if not the, cornerstone of what gives our church its identity.

-You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you can't handle being offended. If you haven't been offended yet, its either because you haven't been around long enough, or you haven't pushed hard enough. In this church you need to be ready for, and welcome, this challenge. Please understand that the offense is not personal. Disturbing people's sense of comfort is needed to initiate the change our values encourage us to seek.

- You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're a Christian who doesn't think atheists belong here.
- You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're an atheist who thinks Christians don't belong here, or Buddhists, or psychics, or pagans, or spiritualists or GLBTQ, or even those of a different political persuasion.
- You should not be a UU if you want all the answers because we don't have them. We don't even have all the questions.

And finally **the fourth criterion**: You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you can't stand being called bad names. Especially in Utah, being a member of this church is going to put you out of the mainstream of religious thought/behavior. If you stand up for what this church professes to be about, you will be subjected to ridicule. I will even go further by saying if you have not been made, at least, a little uncomfortable by stands you take as a UU, you may not be doing enough. When you tell people you're Unitarian Universalist, some of them will seize on the more sensational aspects of this church. *"Oh, you're that atheist church."* or *"You're the people who worship flowers"* or, as we faced when we tried to buy a building for our church on 3rd West and West Center in Logan, being called, *"the non-Christian Church"* at a meeting we were not invited to. Like there is something wrong with us that we don't see Jesus in the same way they do. I guess they were worried we were going to proselytize to their children. Being labeled is a price you pay and a risk you take in belonging to this church. There's bravery in the decision to stay. There's courage in not running out when you're under fire. If it's any consolation, Unitarians and Universalists have had a long history of being labeled and vilified - and of responding with courage when standing up for these principles. This comes from the early days of our church. In our history, UU's have fought many injustices including that respectable institution called slavery, the battles for voting rights, and women's struggle for civil liberties.

There are some who may say you should not be a member of this church if you don't get involved, if you don't pledge, or if your purpose is to be entertained on Sunday morning for an hour. I will not go that far. Remember, the goal is humane living. Other than some of the most flagrant examples of the criterion presented today, each of us decides for ourselves what constitutes humane living. But, for me, it is the engagement on a personal level, the act of being an active and visible voice for our principles, and the knowledge I have contributed financially to our future here in Cache Valley that make this experience so much more meaningful. If you come here only because we are the church that does not make you pray to Jesus, you are missing the best that we have to offer. I am afraid, if you can't find the connection between what happens inside this building and where you go all week, this will ultimately be a disappointing experience. But, in this church, it is your choice.

Finally, despite being the voice of today's message, I am not the poster child for UU values. I personally struggle with my own barriers to acceptance and inclusion and doubt my inner conflict will ever be resolved. I am endlessly grateful, though, for the opportunity to be a part of both the FREE PULPIT and the FREE PEW. I come here because of the dialogue, because, at least emotionally and philosophically, I can embrace the criterion for membership, and because of how much I value what each and every one of you brings to my experience here. My experience through this church and congregation, the opportunity to watch and learn from you, help me on my quest to live more fully and responsibly. From my heart, I thank you.