

Guilty As Charged

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Rev. Craig M. Nowak

Imagine you have been charged with being a Unitarian Universalist, also known as a UU.
How do you plead?
How solid is the case for or against your conviction?

It is perhaps difficult for us to imagine being put on trial for our religious beliefs, affiliation, or practice. For one thing, The Unitarian Universalist Association, of which SUUS is a member congregation, does not apply a creedal test, nor does it charge and try its member congregations, clergy, or seminary professors for heresy as the Southern Baptist seminary professor accused of universalism was in our reading today.

That's not to say our religious forbearers were not charged, tried, and convicted of being heretics. Indeed some, like Michael Servetus in the 16th century who challenged Calvinist doctrine, most notably, the theology concerning the Trinity and Norbert Capek, in the 20th C., who spoke and acted against the Nazis in occupied Czechoslovakia, became martyrs for the faith we today call Unitarian Universalism.

I think it safe to assume, few, if any of us, aspire to be martyrs..and if you do, you and I should probably have a chat. Still, I do think it is worthwhile to reflect now and then on the question of whether or not there is sufficient evidence to charge and convict us of being Unitarian Universalists.

For some time now statistics have often shown a sizable number of people who have heard of Unitarian Universalism identity as Unitarian Universalist in the United States. Many times more, in fact, than the official number published by the Unitarian Universalist Association which uses data supplied by congregations to estimate the number of Unitarian Universalists. Undoubtedly some of this is explained by the popularity of websites like Beliefnet which happens to feature something called the Belief-O-Matic, a nifty little online quiz that tries to match seekers with a religion based on a person's responses to a series of questions.

I've taken the Belief-O-Matic quiz and low and behold it suggested I was a Unitarian Universalist. And this makes sense to me when I consider that the hallmarks of the liberal religious tradition of which Unitarian Universalism is a part, include freedom, reason and tolerance.

Let's for a moment, consider each in the context of Unitarian Universalism starting with freedom.

Unitarian Universalism is an heretical faith. This is actually a badge of honor rather than a source of shame for UU's, as the word heresy comes from the Greek meaning "to choose." Indeed, Unitarian Universalism has often been called a "chosen faith". Unitarian Universalism affords its members the freedom to choose their beliefs and exercise the right of conscience in that choosing. This freedom to choose is far reaching and applies not only to one's beliefs and theology but to congregational affairs. The freedom afforded UU's is not a license to say or do anything one wants at the expense of the others, however, it is an invitation intended by our forbearers to both encourage and empower people to venture into the depths of their convictions and ideals.

Once in the depths, UU's are invited to test and refine their convictions and ideals through the use of reason and the wisdom of experience. UU's are not asked to dutifully assent to the faith claims of others without being able to explore and examine those claims, nor are UU's excused from exploring and examining their own faith claims. Ours is not a once and for all type religion, but a living tradition responsive to new insights and understandings.

Relatedly, tolerance is Unitarian Universalism's call for humility lest the mind and spirit become hardened by too rigid an application of reason or experience. The ideal of tolerance invites us to remain open to and honor life's diversity (including human diversity) and mystery (a willingness to admit what we don't, and can't know or prove everything using empirical evidence, and don't actually need to to live our faith fully). Tolerance continually calls us back to lives devoted to the discovery and service of truth rather than the accumulation of information and facts.

Freedom, reason, and tolerance. I have to assume the answers I provided on the Belief-O-Matic quiz indicated a high level of resonance with these aspects of liberal religion in order for it to suggest I'm a Unitarian Universalist. And its true these aspects of liberal religion, especially in the context of UUism, resonate deeply with me. Indeed, it is one of the reasons I first visited a UU church many years ago. But is personal resonance with these values and ideals alone what makes someone a Unitarian Universalist? Would that alone be grounds enough to charge let alone convict one of being a UU?

Our presence here today in this sanctuary is probably enough to at least get most of us charged. No doubt, some of you might have the charges dropped once it is determined you're visiting us for the first time or "church shopping" as they say. Sure you nodded in agreement with some things said and maybe sang a couple of hymns but that's probably not enough to convince a jury at this point.

Those of us still under suspicion would then likely be questioned as to our beliefs. Now as I noted earlier one of the hallmarks of Unitarian Universalism is freedom to choose, which includes the right of each UU to determine their own theological beliefs. Thus UU's hold quite divergent theological beliefs and draw from many sources to formulate and refine those beliefs. Of course having a theology informed by many sources and experiences hardly makes one a UU. Anyone can do it, really. And increasingly, with the rise of the "nones" (people claim no religious affiliation at all) building one's own theology is becoming the norm rather than the exception in the Western World.

Besides, "having the right beliefs", Robert Walsh reminds us, "is not enough...to bring in a guilty verdict." Walsh is right, of course. Beliefs, and this would include resonance with certain ideals or values, are not enough. Merely holding certain beliefs or finding resonance with certain ideals does not necessarily make one an adherent of those beliefs or ideas. At best it makes one a sympathizer. It makes me think of the relative or friend we all seem to have who quite freely and passionately expresses their political opinions but doesn't bother to vote. It's almost jarring, creating a sense of disconnect and leaving one unsure as to where a person really stands or if they really believe what they say.

This is why the seminary professor in our reading was acquitted. He harbored noble thoughts and made lofty claims but in the end they remained just that...noble thoughts and lofty claims...a sort of private religion...bound to nothing...accountable to no one.

"Beliefs, no matter how noble", writes Walsh, "must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power."

With this simple observation, Walsh makes a case for religion... both its organization and practice in community. Though there is hardly consensus on the precise etymology of the word religion, it is often said that it comes from a Latin root meaning, "to bind." And this is what Walsh is getting at in our reading. Religion is a way of binding people together for a common purpose. In most religious traditions people are bound by shared belief often expressed as a creed and the church provides a place and means to explore and live informed by that common creed.

UU's are not bound by a common belief or creed, but by covenant, a solemn promise we make to one another to encourage and empower one another to discern, test and practice or live into our beliefs and values. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this distinction as a defining characteristic of Unitarian Universalism.

The congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant with one another and each congregation has its own covenant. Covenantal relationships provide the necessary support to engage and ponder questionable certainties and faithful doubts. They are also a means of holding one another accountable, providing parameters for the exercise of freedom of choice, reason and tolerance

SUUS's covenant provides the framework within which we discern, embody, and practice not only our individual beliefs, but the aspirations expressed in our Unitarian Universalist values and congregational mission. It reads:

To ensure our community is a safe and inspirational place where we welcome all, embrace diversity and support individuals, we the members of Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society commit to the following:
Act with good will and stay in relationship
Listen deeply and assume good intentions
Be open to change
Maintain mutual respect
Take concerns to the person(s) involved
Share strengths, talents, and resources
Support each other in living this covenant
When resolution is elusive, seek help from the Committee on Healthy Relationships

Our covenant calls us to be in community, to that place, in the words of Rudolph Nemser, where we “find what we cannot find alone...do what we cannot by ourselves...affirm challenges, sorrows, tasks, joys...not ours only.” A place “where truth acknowledged we'd never left, home.”

Paradoxically it is in community that we are best able to discover and practice who and how we are and where we stand as individuals...to know and inhabit our center. Today on this regathering Sunday, we are called home...back to community...that we may know and inhabit our center.

“If they are going to pin Unitarian Universalism on me,” writes Robert Walsh, “they will have to be able to show that I participated and supported a Unitarian Universalist Church. That is the only way to be sure.”

And there are many ways to participate and support a Unitarian Universalist church...showing up for worship...participating in its ministries, social justice, and outreach; pledging, volunteering and in so doing, living into our covenant...thus ensuring the transformation of noble beliefs and lofty ideals into lives lived with purpose and conviction as Unitarian Universalists. Lives that aim to affirm what is good, confront that which is evil and unjust both within and outside ourselves; lives buoyed by hope and tempered with humility; lives that, in the words of our Unitarian forbearer, William Ellery Channing, “preach more loudly than our lips.” And I would add, more loudly than our thoughts and beliefs.

This is the charge of we who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. May we ensure we live our faith worthy of conviction...no chance of acquittal, but guilty as charged.

Amen and Blessed Be