

Belief and Belonging

A person thinking about exploring a new religious group naturally wants to know, “What do I have to believe to belong here?” Many religious groups have a creed; a statement of the beliefs that everyone who belongs is expected to share.

Unitarian Universalists have a different way. We believe that revelation is not sealed and that there’s always more truth to be discovered. We locate ultimate religious authority in the individual’s own experience and understandings and think that human beings can enrich each other’s spiritual lives with our different beliefs, theological questions, and spiritual practices. We speak a variety of religious and spiritual languages, even though we each may have one that we hold dear. In short, the answer to the question “What do I have to believe to belong here?” is “what you already believe in your heart and soul now” and also: “Your beliefs may change as you learn from experience and from this community, and those beliefs will belong among us as well.”

For some people, especially those coming to us from strong creedal traditions, a lack of strongly stated, shared beliefs feels rootless. But Unitarian Universalism’s deep roots are in a way of being religious, rather than in a set of beliefs. We covenant with each other to support each other in a free and responsible quest for meaning that never ends and to bring our religious values to life in the world around us. Our way is open, inclusive, and full of wonder, growth, and community. All are welcome, but those who find themselves with beliefs that don’t fit orthodox creeds are particularly likely to find relief, freedom, and good company for the religious journey in a creedless community such as ours.

Instead of gathering around a set of beliefs we share, we gather to do some of the same things together:

- ◆ We support each other as our beliefs morph, deepen, and change through our lives. Our faith is not a set of statements; it is a journey.
- ◆ We learn from those with different beliefs and practices. We value conversation and strive to cultivate curiosity about one another’s spiritual journeys and understandings.
- ◆ We worship together to get in touch with our highest values, powers, and potential and are refreshed and strengthened by our time together.
- ◆ We find ways to work together to make our world a better place. For most of us, action is an important part of our spirituality.
- ◆ We learn to find our own solid spiritual grounding, to appreciate that the grounding our neighbors find is different from ours, with no more or less claim to wisdom and truth, and to lean on our community when life’s challenges shake our ground.
- ◆ We value spiritual growth and respect new learnings, so this community will always be available to you as a spiritual home regardless of how your beliefs may change. When you join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, you are asked only to affirm

that you want to do what the congregation is doing, not to pledge to believe what the congregation believes.

- ◆ We honor doubts and questions and encourage you to express them and look for answers as a faithful step on the journey of faith.

What we share together instead of belief is roots, stability, and shared values. Unitarian Universalism has deep roots in Christian history while seeing all religious and spiritual traditions as sources of wisdom. We celebrate the traditions that people bring with them into our communities from their own histories. Most people who are attracted to our free faith find that we have some general convictions in common.

For instance:

- ◆ Most of us believe in the inherent worth and dignity of our fellow human beings, and therefore believe that we need to be civil to those with whom we disagree and fair to those who are different from us.
- ◆ Most of us believe that we exist within a web of life and community and should tend those connections and consider the long-term consequences of our actions. Therefore, we care about our natural and human environments, and some of us are environmental activists.
- ◆ Lots of us believe that truth unfolds over time, that great books and historical teachings can guide our search for truth but should not limit it. We look to the future for truth as well as the past, to current wisdom as well as ancient teachings.
- ◆ Lots of us believe that our nearly infinite universe is complex beyond our understanding, and that, therefore, multiple and differing perspectives are not necessarily in conflict. Therefore, we endeavor to be curious about the faith of others.
- ◆ Most of us believe that knowledge is better than ignorance, and many think of ourselves as life-long learners.
- ◆ Most of us believe that democratic governance honors the inherent worth and dignity of each person and promotes justice and equity. Therefore, many of us are politically active.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith with a big umbrella. Our 1,000 congregations around the nation (and more around the world!) have a 400-year-old history of including free-thinkers, doubters, religiously mixed families, new practices, and the alternatively faithful. Our congregations include atheists and agnostics, pagans and rationalists, as well as believers in God by many definitions, liberal Christians, and followers of the teachings of the Buddha. We aim to be spiritual *and* religious, but never dogmatic. We aim to be a place for you.

Questions for Reflection:

What beliefs and practices guide my spiritual life?

How has conversation with trusted others about beliefs helped to deepen my understanding? How has such conversation challenged me?

How does the Unitarian Universalist notion of gathering with others around a free and responsible quest for meaning change my idea of what a religion is?

What beliefs and practices from my past do I want to bring into my future?

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For Further Reading:

Kendyl L. R. Gibbons and William R. Murry, eds. *Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2017.

Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller, eds. *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2014.

Jerrie Kishpaugh Hildebrand and Shirley Ann Ranck, eds. *Pagan and Earth-Centered Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2017.

Daniel Chesney Kanter. *Faith for the Unbeliever*. Skinner House Books, 2017.

Paul Rasor. *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*. Skinner House Books, 2005.

Kathleen Rolenz, ed. *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2006.

Sam Trumbore and Wayne B. Arnason, eds. *Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2013.