

# Creeding is Not Believing

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A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson      July 17, 2016

The word, "Creed" is used in different ways. Most broadly, it is used to talk about religious beliefs.... As in, "Persons of many creeds, colors, and nationalities."

Also, very broadly, any set of beliefs that guides a person's life is informally called a creed. The Assassin's Creed, the Liberal creed, and so on.

There is also a very specific definition of the word creed, which is, A creed is a statement of beliefs, to which one must adhere to be a member of a particular religious body. Want to be an Episcopalian, a Catholic, a Methodist? You have to know and affirm the creeds of the churches... things like the triune nature of God, the virgin birth, heaven and hell, and, in particular, that Jesus died for your sins. Usually, these documents begin, "I believe...." As in "I believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...." In Latin, the language the oldest creeds were written in, I believe is "Credo"....hence the word, "Creed."

## Creeds and Christians

Of all the world's faiths, Christians make the greatest use of creeds. Other religions have much simpler statements, which, they don't call creeds, but which work the same way. To be a Muslim, for instance you must affirm that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." It is called the a-she-heh'-dah.

The Catholic church ruled the Christian roost for centuries, and in the early days, it was downright dangerous to express doubts about a single one of the dozens of very specific beliefs in the church's official creeds. You could get burned at the stake that way. The new Protestants mostly used creeds to determine fitness for church membership, although they quickly stopped burning people at the stake. Credal tests of Christian fitness was the model they knew.

But the Puritans, burned by the religious establishment of the Church of England, tossed creeds along with Bishops, stained glass windows and even Christmas in their quest to purify the Christian faith. For their trouble, they endured considerable persecution and eventually moved to the New World, where they colonized New England and set about building a society based on their practices.

These Puritans are our direct religious ancestors, but we certainly would not now agree with all that they did. For instance, they made a law that everyone in New England had to live within hearing distance of church bells, and a parish church with clear glass windows was the first building erected in a new town. Everyone was expected to go to that church, which was tax supported. The Puritans were pretty strict about what people did, however, they felt that what people believed was between the individual and God. They were, in their own way, children of the enlightenment, with its more positive assessment of human nature and human reason.

The story of how the Puritans became us is an interesting one, suffice it to say that about 2/3 of the existing congregations in New England which trace their roots to those parish churches built with tax money in each town are now Unitarian churches.

Which is why we have never had a creed. We have never based church membership on believing the right things. Instead, when it comes to joining together, we focus, not on believing things but on doing things. Our church's Mission Covenant, which is on the inside back cover of your order of service, is a list of things we aim to do together....nurture children, help each other grow, make the world a better place...

The affirmation in the order of service... that's not a statement of belief but an affirmation of our mission, of what we are going to do together. And nobody has to agree with every jot and tittle, it's a poem, not a legal document.

And when it comes time to welcome new members into our congregation, we ask people if they want to do the things we do here, if they will help us support this place that supports us, and we tell them that we hope that this community will help them grow in love and in faith, and the word 'believe' never comes into the picture. On this, we're with Puritans...what you believe, important as it is, is personal, between you and god, or you and your conscience. We just don't do creeding. It's not our way.

That doesn't mean that we think that beliefs are not important, not at all. Actually, we think that beliefs are really important...so important that we gather as a congregation, converse and listen and think together about them, organize to act on them, and remind each other when we forget. We share lots of beliefs in this congregation, and someone who does not share many of our beliefs might decide that they should find themselves a more compatible religious community. The difference is that decision is up to the individual, not to the congregation. You'll never get thrown out for asking the wrong question around here, or for proclaiming what you believe, and if you don't find you have the kind of company here you need, we will wish you well when you leave to find it. But it's your decision, not ours.

So.... we don't creed here. It's against our religion...and not only our history, but against some of the things that most of us believe. We believe that the universe we live in is beautiful and complex and unfolding and that there never can be a statement equally applicable to all, about what to think or do with our lives. And we believe in the sacred spark of conscience within persons, which leads us in many different directions...another reason that no one creed will ever do.

We do believe here, and we do the sacred work of discovering and molding our beliefs here, as well as exploring and celebrating and living them. To do that, we need to understand what beliefs really are.

What exactly is a belief? A belief is an opinion about a matter that cannot be known for sure. It is a guess about one of the many unknowns of life

Our beliefs are about things that can't be proven. They are about God and Spirit and goodness and the meanings of things, about an afterlife, the utility of the democratic process in creating a just community, about who to trust and what we should be doing with our lives. Those kinds of things are either too complex to prove using science or completely outside of its realm.

Beliefs cannot be proven to be true or not. A belief that cannot be true, like, believing that 2 + 2 is 5, is not only an absurd belief, its' not really a belief at all, it's an orange in an apple crate. A belief that could never be false is similarly not really a belief. Some beliefs have more plausibility than others, more weight of history, more adherents, more moral force, and a better effect on one's life, but not a one can be proven.

We come to our beliefs by absorbing the beliefs of important people around us...first our parents and the adults they introduce us to, then, our peers, and finally, as our brains mature, we begin to think for ourselves, examining our own lives and thoughts and perhaps ranging further into human knowledge in our studies.

Our beliefs also come from our own experiences, both interior and exterior. The person who has been betrayed or abused may have a hard time believing in the goodness of people. The person who has never had a spiritual experience will naturally have a hard time believing in God. The person who has never met a trans person or a Muslim or an atheist might have more difficulty believing that these people, too have worth and dignity. Our beliefs are the result of our upbringing and how we processed it, about our experiences and what we make of them, about our role models and what they taught us.

Each and every one of us has beliefs. "There is a god" is a belief, and so is, "There is no such thing as God." "I believe in going out of my way to help my neighbors," is different from, "I believe that each person should take care of themselves," but they are both beliefs. Believing

is a part of human life. You don't get out of bed each morning without gathering your beliefs around you...what would be the point?

And furthermore, it matters what we believe. It matters a lot. We mold our lives based on what we believe and our society is molded on the beliefs of the majority.

- Belief in a stern and angry father god makes for stern and angry fathers in human families, and a strict and punitive father-like government.
- Belief that your religion is the only true religion makes it hard for people to see the humanity of those who believe differently, and a society that believes its religion is the only true religion is almost always oppressive to those who don't share it.
- A belief that God will produce justice in the next life gives license for all kinds of injustice in this life.
- A belief that nature was created for humans to use, or that humans have evolved to such an extent that they are not really a part of nature...either of those beliefs suggest that exploiting nature 'till she drops dead is ok.
- President Obama believes that our sorrows right now can make our nation better, and I'm sure that comes from a more general belief that our sufferings can help us to grow. Do you believe that? If you do, you will go easier through life's difficult patches.
- Believing that Jesus was sent to us to teach us how to love motivates us to love our neighbors.
- Believing that each person is important and that every person has worth and dignity helps us to work for justice in society.
- Believing that God loves us helps us to love ourselves and others, too.

Now, every once in a while, I hear some well-meaning UU say, "In this church we can believe anything we want to." Now I gotta tell you, a person can ruin a minister's day, saying things like that. It is the fingernail scraping on the blackboard of a UU minister's life. Rarely fatal, but a real downer.

I know you say it all the time. I think you mean -- when you say it -- that membership in this church is not contingent on explicit agreement to any set of beliefs...that is, that we don't have a creed, here. That is true, but very different from saying that you can believe anything you want.

For, of course, we can't. we are unable to believe anything we want to. That would put us in a theological Alice in Wonderland where Alice is told by the Red Queen that she is so good at believing that she has sometimes believed "6 impossible things before breakfast."

But really, friends, consider the source! White Rabbits don't carry stop watches, there is no pill that will make you small enough to jump down a rabbit hole, and it is not possible for a healthy person to force themselves to believe something that they don't believe. Even Alice is skeptical.

We can explore our beliefs, introduce ourselves to beliefs that might work for us, experiment with believing something to see if it is helpful, think about the implications of our beliefs to see if we REALLY believe what we think we believe, and on and on, but we can't actually, believe anything we want to.

Take, for instance Hell. How many people here were taught at some point in your life, that there was such a thing as Hell?

Having talked to UU's over many years, I can tell you some of the things that happened. While it usual for children to accept their parents' beliefs, some of you, even as young children, thought that you really couldn't believe in Hell. Others of you believed it until you discovered that your Jewish friend was going there, or your atheist military buddy, or the nice librarian who stocked books which your minister declared to be of the devil.... And those things made you ask your parents or your teachers, "Really? But the librarian is kind, the atheist is a true patriot, the Jewish friend is a good person?"

Or maybe it was explained to you that goodness wasn't the issue, the issue was correct belief, that only Christians could be saved. And then, in geography, you learned about isolated tribes, and lands where there were no Christians. Or maybe, as a young adult, you traveled to some of those lands, or had a college roommate from one of those lands....

At some point, you said to yourself, "I don't believe that. I can't believe that. It doesn't make sense. No good god would do that." Or...whatever you thought.

Whatever happened to you, though, you can't really say you could believe anything you wanted to. We come to our beliefs, sometimes unwillingly, and we can resist them or deny them, we can be quiet about them, challenge them, or run from them, but they are what they are.

We cannot will ourselves to believe in things that don't make sense to us and we cannot force ourselves to believe in things that are not a part of our experience. Most of us would have

taken the easier road of orthodox Christianity if only we could have believed what we were told as children in Sunday School. But, early or late, we decided we couldn't, and so, unwilling to profess what we did not believe, (and clear that first person to know if we did was the God we now had doubts about,) we left and found a church where we could be free of the pressure to believe in what other people had experienced and to peruse our own path instead. The point of this church is not that “we can believe anything we want to,” the point is that we can express and explore the beliefs that we find ourselves with, unhindered by what we are “supposed to” believe.

This does not mean that we believe nothing or that we have no faith. No one can live without beliefs and faith.

We believe much. We believe, by and large, in the inherent goodness of human beings. We believe that knowledge is better than ignorance. We believe that honesty is the best policy. We believe that the democratic method is fair. We believe that every individual human being has inalterable worth and that we must treat them with dignity. Some of us believe in a pretty traditional kind of god or goddess, who answers prayers and watches over us. Some of us believe in a divine force working for good in our world. Some of us believe that there is no God or force or anything supernatural like that. Almost none of us believe in Hell (That’s our Universalist side...a story for another day), but we have an even larger variety of beliefs about what happens after this life than we do about divinity. We mostly don’t believe in a God who sits in heaven, deciding which prayers to answer and which to ignore, but many of us pray to align ourselves with the mystery of the universe or to bend its invisible forces in a desired direction.

All of these statements are statements of faith and belief. They cannot be proven, only defended. Nor can their opposites be proven -- only defended. We cannot live without acting on assumptions that cannot be proved. We are not offered a choice between believing and not believing. Rather, we are offered a choice of competing beliefs.

This church exists to help you learn about and make good choices about all those competing beliefs, because, they matter.

And naturally, when people are exploring becoming a part of this community, they want to know, “What do UU’s believe” Mostly people are expecting the answer to come in the form of a creed, because that’s their experience, So when people ask you that question, you have to start by blowing their minds a little.

I say, “First, you have to understand that we don’t have creeds. We don’t all believe the same things. We gather to grow together, challenge and support each other, and discover and live our beliefs. Everybody is welcome. It’s a path, not a destination.

And then, because I want people to understand us, I tell them about some important things that lots of UU’s believe.

Lots of us believe in the worth and dignity of every person, and therefore we believe that we must be fair to those with whom we disagree or even who transgress the worth and dignity of others.

Lots 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.

Lots of us believe that truth unfolds over time, that great books and historical teachings can guide our search for truth but not limit it. We look to the future, not to the past, for greater truth.

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.

Lots of us believe that our religious beliefs should lead to action in our lives.

Lots of us believe that the world is good and unfolding towards greater good. (but as a series of switchbacks, not in a straight line) We often say, after Martin Luther King (who got this phrase from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian preacher) that the arc of history bends towards Justice.

Lots of us believe that we are better together, that it is good to be a part of congregations, communities of care and concern and conversation.

How do you live in a world like this one, overarched by climate change that could be catastrophic, punctuated by gunfire, terrorists, the angry and violent, permeated by racism and injustice which, we all know, even if we are not its current victims, could eventually engulf us. How do we get up every morning when we know, if we let ourselves, that a drunk driver or a wayward heart could flatten us in an instant, that a foolish moment could take a loved one from us, that a fire could deprive us of all that we own?

We get up each morning, in spite of all that, because of what we believe, and it matters what we believe.

We start with, "It is good to be alive."

We move to, "How can I help?"

We ask ourselves, "What sustains me?"

We wonder, "This thing that I always believed, is it really good, does it still seem true, does it help me in my life?"

We join communities like this one, where we are accepted and welcomed and asked if we want to help.

We live, believing. Better Together.