

Coffee Hour Chat Questions

Question 1: So what is this Unitarian Universalism?

Unitarian Universalism, known as UU, is a liberal religion. It has the capacity to change and grow, and incorporate new information from the great adventure of human learning. It embraces the unfolding creation of the universe, and includes every old thing and every new thing for consideration.

Defining religion is a difficult journey. But I'd say our main practice is that we come together, perhaps in the pursuit of answers to the big questions of life, or just to be together. Maybe to work together for social justice, to help those in need, or to protect the environment. Or perhaps to sing, smile, and laugh.

"The Seven Principles and Six Sources" are a distillation of UU thinking. But at least every fifteen years there is a big review of them within the association of UU chapters to see if they still make sense. Imagine that: An organized religion that has built into it the incorporation of new thinking for an ever-changing world!

I'm comfortable here because there's no pressure to accept something based on somebody else's reckoning, nor to accept something without evidence. And UUs reject arguments based on fear.

Any worthwhile idea should be able to survive scrutiny.

Question 2: Okay, you're a UU. What do you believe?

OK. Well, just to be clear, this is what I believe, not what all UUs believe. I can only speak for myself. And in a funny way, for me that may very well be the essence of UU. I've been fascinated in my conversations with other UUs at the diversity of our thought and experience. And for me, getting to know the people here, and the stories of how they arrived at UU, is the best part. So here's my story.

How did I get here? Well, I was raised in a Jewish family. My parents were neutral on the existence of God, and explicitly left it up to me and my brothers to explore the issue and come to our own conclusions. I was very sick as a kid, and at one point I tried praying to God to get well. Nothing changed, and after awhile I lost interest. I just didn't believe. As

I grew up and learned about the world, I found words to describe my lack of belief in God. But occasionally, I found that I was still interested in religion, as a way to be with people, and perhaps to work together for some higher purpose. Somehow I came to think of religion and God as separate issues. For twenty-five years I lived in the Synanon community right up the hill from here. During the last years of that community, the founder, Chuck Dederich, proclaimed it to be a religion. And then we all spent a lot of time exploring what that might mean. I was OK with that, because we didn't talk about God, but we were exploring the meaning of life, and how best to live our lives.

A few years ago my wife and I joined a local synagogue. It was a reform Jewish congregation, yet, for both of us there was just too much ritual and looking backwards, and too much talk about God.

Here at UU, people's stories often include having grown up in another religious tradition and finding it lacking. Then a personal search for something more satisfying, and then discovering UU and exclaiming, "Ah! Finally a religion with room for me!" That's what happened to me, and that's why I'm still here.

I don't know how long it will last. I'm struggling with what I believe. But coming together with people, to think about what we know to be true, and what we can do to improve the world, that part I like a lot. If the definition of religion can include "People coming together to think about how to live, and how to pool their energies toward good causes", I'm happy.

In the first months of retirement I read four recent books about atheism, including Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion." While all these books reaffirmed my skepticism about the "guy in the sky" view of God, I nonetheless found an urge to investigate some religious texts as part of a music composition project. And I also kept remembering that during the civil rights movement, many religious congregations were instrumental in bringing very positive change in our country. So when Marilyn Geise invited me to come down to UU and play music I accepted her invitation. I found the UU Fellowship to be a comfortable and nourishing place, and that led me to join the Fellowship.

Why do I stay? I participated in a class here called Building Your Own Theology. In UU World nobody tells you what to believe, you have to figure it out for yourself. However, there's no dogma to which you are required to pledge allegiance. We are encouraged to explore the meaning of life, unencumbered by a requirement of blind acceptance, adherence, or reverence. We laugh a lot here, and I'm pretty sure that the only religion for me is one that includes a lot of questioning and laughing.

Then Harold Wood told me of an amazing book by Michael Dowd called “Thank God for Evolution.” I recommend it to anyone searching for ways to overcome a seemingly irreconcilable gap between traditional religious thought and the flood of knowledge about the world available to us in modern times. I’ve learned a lot about evolution and religion from this book, and it’s helped me think about this presentation.

Here is one of the author’s ideas: In the course of human evolution, in every culture, we developed spoken language, and a rich tradition of stories about where we came from and why we are here. They are how wisdom was passed from generation to generation. However, as part of an oral tradition, these stories changed over time, with people’s changing understanding of the world.

But then we developed written language. Now we had a big problem. Because we keep learning about the world. Learning is active and ongoing. Written is finished, static, past-tense. And when our new learning conflicted with something in our written tradition, what were we to do?

Well, when Galileo proved that the earth was not the center of the universe, the Catholic Church couldn’t accept it, and coerced him into recanting. But surely we do better in modern times, right? Well, read up on how the Bush administration coerced scientists into changing their reports on global warming because the reports contradicted Bush doctrine.

As you can see, this problem still vexes us several thousand years into the process. We long for a continuing connection with our ancestors. And the stories are an important link. But as we keep learning about the world, we struggle to integrate what we know with what the ancestors gave us.

So, why not just throw away all that tired old mythology and start over? I’ll leave you there to ponder the matter. Read the book to see how Dowd resolves that paradox. Back to what I believe....

(breathe...)

This I believe... I believe that the universe and everything in it are amazing and wondrous, and that any religion that deliberately excludes any part of it can’t be trusted as a good source of knowledge about the world and how to live in it.

I believe that wise people from our past must be forgiven for believing things that have since been disproven. But what about people who now insist on the truth of these same things in contradiction to the irrefutable evidence? I struggle to have compassion for them. And I believe that the wisest people from the old times would urge us to include our hard-won gains in knowledge.

I believe in Science. I believe that the emergence of science is one of the great advances in human cultural evolution. I believe that human awareness of the universe—accelerated through wonders such as the Hubbell telescope—is the universe aware of itself. I trust science to provide truth about how things are.

I am inspired by the answers that modern science gives us every day to questions about our origins—cosmic and biological. And beyond that science, for the most part, I really don't care how we got here, and I believe it's impossible to know.

But now that we're here, what should we be doing? **What is the meaning of life?** Science is somewhat less helpful for these questions. I really have no idea why I believe with considerable fervor that some things, like love, joy, art, music, community, kindness, and all of nature, are so very important.

And I believe that the practice of religion is fraught with difficulty. I reject the notion that something religious is by definition good. Some religions are not just useless, but can be harmful, in that they cripple their adherents, and convince them to squander the great gifts of thinking, learning, and questioning. The practitioners of those religions sometimes bring terrible pain and suffering upon their fellow humans in support of horrible ideas which enlightened people began abandoning hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago.

In “The God Delusion”, Richard Dawkins describes in fascinating detail some of our learning about the evolution of human psychology with respect to religion. While his main thrust is forceful and persuasive advocacy for abandoning religion altogether, he nonetheless provides compelling evidence that need for religious belief is built into us.

Dawkins' solution to this dilemma seems to be for humanity, one person at a time, to confront this biological condition by applying his or her intellect. But it needn't be a lonely process. We are all in this together. And he demonstrates that, throughout the world's cultures, moral and ethical beliefs have emerged and evolved, and continue to do so, in large measure apart from our religions.

On the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life you will find surveys of people's religious beliefs. Through a sea of detail, it is clear that our attitudes about religion are constantly changing. And there is an indisputable trend on most traditional religious matters toward a liberal interpretation, toward abandoning old myths, and viewing an awful lot of the old writings as some kind of poetry, rather than an historical record, or guidance for the future.

I believe that UU and other liberal congregations are part of a mainstream movement of religious progress. Maybe being in UU is like being in recovery. We're recovering from old religious ideas that threaten the existence of our planet and all life upon it. Our fellowship is our support group.

Maybe we can all thank God for evolution—the evolution of religion.

I'm taking it one day at a time.