

## **Things Commonly Believed**

Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion. From time to time Unitarians and Universalists have made statements about what they believe. These have been understood as descriptive, not prescriptive. We have always insisted on freedom of conscience. This does not mean we are free to believe whatever we wish. Rather, we are free to believe as the conscience dictates and we are obligated to submit our beliefs to the test of reason and science. As Unitarian Universalists we do not see a conflict between science and religion. In lieu of creeds our churches are organized around covenants – promises about how we will walk together. What follows are some examples of historical efforts to describe what is commonly believed amongst us and some examples of covenants that have been used by different churches in different times.

### **Winchester Confession**

Adopted in 1802 at Winchester, New Hampshire

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.

A clause which came to be known as the "liberty clause" was appended to the Confession:

Yet while we adopt a general profession of belief . . . we leave it to the several churches and societies or to smaller associations of churches, if such should be formed, within the limits of our General Association, to continue or adopt within themselves, such more articles of faith . . . as may appear to them best under their particular circumstances, provided they do not disagree with our general profession or plan.

### **Things Commonly Believed Among Us**

The Western Unitarian Conference was organized in 1852 to promote Unitarianism in the midwest. Under the leadership of Jenkin Lloyd Jones and William Channing Gannett, it soon became a vehicle for theological radicalism. The radicals were increasingly uncomfortable with the Christocentric nature of New England Unitarianism. They were moving towards a vision of religion that was not God centered, but ethically centered. This movement was the direct precursor to the Humanist

Movement that we recognize in the Twentieth Century.

The radicals sought to articulate a common set of beliefs. They were not accepted by all. The traditional Unitarian Christians were particularly displeased. But the statement that resulted gives a good insight into what many individual Unitarians had come to believe. As always, this was not a creedal statement, but a statement representative of what many believed. Belief remained a personal matter to be determined by the individual conscience.

We believe that to love the Good and live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

"We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

"We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

"We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.

We believe in the growing nobility of Man;

We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth, to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;

We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good man in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of Good;

We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all.

We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakes in man the sense of union here and now with things eternal--the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us an earnest of the life to come.

We worship One-in-All--that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man its Ought,--that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God--that Love with which our souls commune." This One we name, --the Eternal God, our Father.

## Principles and Purposes

Article II, Section C-2.1 includes the following statement:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Section C-2.4 continues with this language:

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test.

### The Mayflower Compact

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are under-written, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the eleventh of November [New Style, November 21], in the year

of the reign of our sovereign lord, King James, of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Dom. 1620.

Pilgrim Covenant – 1620

We, the Lord's free people, join ourselves by a covenant of the Lord into a church estate in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known to us, according to our best endeavors.

First Parish, Salem, Massachusetts - 1629

We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, . . . to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himselfe unto us in his Blessed word of truth.

First Parish, Dedham, Massachusetts - 1636

We whose names are here unto subscribed do, in the fear and reverence of our Almighty God, mutually and severally promise . . . amongst ourselves and each to profess and practice one truth according to that most perfect rule, the foundation whereof is ever lasting love.

Unitarian Universalist Church of Sacco Biddeford, Maine

In the freedom of truth and in the spirit of Love, we unite for the worship of God and the service of all.

Unitarian Universalist Society of Geneva, Illinois - 19th Century

Being desirous of promoting practical goodness in the world, and of aiding each other in our moral and religious improvement, we have associated ourselves together . . . -- not as agreeing in opinion, not as having attained universal truth in belief or perfection in character -- but as seekers after truth and goodness.

The "Ames Covenant"

Charles Gordon Ames - 1880

"In the freedom of truth, and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man"

Love is the spirit of this church and service its law.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace;

To see the truth in love; and

To help one another.

~James Vila Blake

Unto the Church Universal, which is the depository of all ancient wisdom and the school of all modern thought;  
Which recognizes in all prophets a harmony, in all scriptures a unity, and through all dispensations a continuity;  
Which abjures all that separates and divides, and always magnifies all that unifies and brings peace;  
Which seeks truth in freedom, justice in love, and individual discipline in social duty;  
And which shall make of all sects, classes, nations, and races, one global community;  
Unto this church and unto all its members, known and unknown throughout the world,  
E pledge the allegiance of our hands and hearts.

Keshab Chandra Sen – Arranged by John Haynes Holmes

### What is a Covenant?

A covenant is a mutual promise between two or more people. Implied or explicit in a covenant is a promise or obligation to a third party to keep the covenant. The third party in theological terms is God. In philosophical terms the third party is a transcendent moral obligation. A contract is different from a covenant in that there is no 'third party'. Because of the third party the obligation to perform remains even if one party materially violates the covenant. In civil law a common example is the person who commits a crime – a material breach of the civic covenant. But because it is a covenant even a guilty person is entitled to 'due process'.