

Creating Religious Community

Richard Macdonald, July 2025
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito

In every survey we have ever done in this congregation, one top reason people give for coming here is for **community**. I quickly realized from my first few visits here that we are part of a strong community, but I wondered, are we a **religious** community? How much did religion matter to us? I could see atheists, humanists, buddhists, Christians and Jews, but what held them all together as a **religious** community?

I didn't get an answer in 20 years of listening to sermons here, in fact, I couldn't even formulate the question, until I read "**America: Religions and Religion**", a textbook on comparative religion, by Professor Catherine Albanese. She outlines the ways that religions create community, either consciously or unconsciously. By studying all types of religions – large modern churches, indigenous cultures, new age gatherings – religious scholars have uncovered three general characteristics that apply to all religious communities. I can finally ask and answer my unspoken questions.

She calls these characteristics the 3 C's, because they all begin with the letter C. Putting these three together creates the 4th C, **Community**. Think of the 3 C's as the legs of a 3-legged stool that supports community on top. My goal today is to tell you about the 3 C's, and, more importantly, to point out some ways that our UU religious community fits into the model.

[Cultuses]

The first leg of the stool is called **Cultuses**. That's an old-fashioned word I had never encountered. The meaning of Cultus is "**An organized system of religious worship or ceremony**". What we today would call **Rituals**.

Now, you'll probably agree with me that UUism is not a ritual-heavy religion. Here is my list of rituals in our Sunday service that create community:

- We have the Lighting of a **flaming chalice** at the beginning of worship

A few other religions use a Chalice as their symbol, but the **Flaming** Chalice is unique to us. If you do a Google search and ask "What religions use a flaming chalice" we're the only one.

I wondered if the flaming chalice was a very old symbol, but it turns out not to be. The design was created in 1941 during WW II by an Austrian for the humanitarian

group: the **Unitarian Service Committee** that saved people from the Nazis. The symbol was used as an icon on their stationery. It was adopted by UU during the 1961 merger, along with (I had never heard this) a second symbol from Universalism, which was a circle with an off-centered cross down near the bottom of the circle. It wasn't until the 1980's that congregations started to actually **light** a chalice during worship services, which was about the same time that the Universalist symbol was lost to our collective memory.

What do **you** think our flaming chalice is meant to represent? Think, think, think. [wait] It turns out there is no official meaning for the chalice on the UUA website, so whatever you think is good enough. Why? Because UUism encourages personal interpretation (this explanation is taken directly from the UUA website). Anyway, we do provide 2 examples of the meaning during each service – one when we light the chalice, and another when we extinguish it.

“We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth [fire is a standard symbol for truth - I will say more about truth], **the warmth of community** [shared chalice or cup is a standard symbol of community], **or the fire of commitment** [commitment suggests purpose leading to action - I will say more about action today]”. So, by these words, our Flaming Chalice represents **truth, community, and commitment.**

- We have the joint recitation of our covenant which builds community
- Intergenerational sharing builds community
- Joys and Sorrows builds community. Other religions have something similar, for example the **call** from a minister and the **response** from the crowd, for example: if I say **Holy** , you say ... **Guacamole**. The responsive reading we did today is a more formal example of Call and Response. Another example is the **speaking in tongues** of Pentecostal and charismatic Christian denominations. Clearly all these help cement the bonds of community.
- And don't forget we have our ritualistic Water Communion and Flower Communion annual services

In conclusion, rituals build community.

[Codes]

Moving on to the second leg of the stool: **Codes**.

“A Code is a set of rules about how a person should act.” For example: **code of conduct, moral code, or ethical code**. Note the word “act” in the definition - it implies an action, as opposed to a thought.

The most well-known moral codes are the 10 commandments from the old testament:

Thou shalt not kill
Thou shalt not steal
Etc.

These comandments are written as **non-actions**, things **not** to do, but some are written as **actions**, or things **to do**.

Honor thy father and thy mother
Keep the sabbath holy

The main characteristic of a code is that it has an **action** – what to do, how to behave. They contain action words.

When we say **“Deeds, not Creeds”**, or **“We are a Covenantal religion, not a Creedal one”**, we are making the statement that **action** is more important to us than **beliefs**. How we **act** is more important than what we **think**.

Clearly, deeds imply action, but do covenants imply action too?

Yes they do: here is part of the definition of a covenant, **“Each party in a covenant agrees to certain actions or non-actions”**. The same actions and non-actions of a commandment. The difference between a covenant and a commandment is that a commandment involves a single person only, as in **“You shall not kill”**, whereas a Covenant is between 2 or more parties, as in **“We covenant to not kill”**.

A well-written Covenant is written as an action statement. Here is an example of our covenant for the value **Interdependence** – look for the action words:

*We covenant to **protect** Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will **create** and **nurture** sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will **work** to repair harm and damaged relationships.*

The point is that covenants are commandments, even though our’s could never fit on a stone tablet.

What about our oldest covenant, the one written in the Order of Service that we recite at every service. By my analysis, the first 3 lines are beliefs, but the last three are commandments:

May love be the spirit of this congregation; [belief, idea, or ideal]

May the quest for truth be its sacrament [quest is a noun; questing is a verb] [sacred sign]

And service be its prayer; [not written as an action]

To dwell together in peace,

To seek knowledge in freedom,

And to help one another in fellowship.

These are our Commandments

[Creeds]

Lastly we come to the final leg of the stool: **Creeds**. But we don't **have** any creeds. OK, OK, let's not panic yet, let's talk about what we **do** have.

Just so we are all on the same page, the simplest definition of a Creed is: "A **Creed** is an idea or belief that members of a faith community affirm to be **true**." In contrast to a code, a well-written creed has no action component; it is simply an **ideal**, or a **belief**.

What about our 7 principles?. First, they have no obvious action. Second, they sound to me like beliefs, but it's hard to tell because they are incomplete sentences. If you walked up to a stranger on the street and said, "**the inherent worth and dignity of every person**", they would say, "eh, what??? What are you talking about?" To emphasize that they are a belief, try this:

We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person

We believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning

Read this way, the 7 principles are statements of beliefs, not statements of action.

The new Article II also contains statements of belief, which are the first sentence of each value. Using Interdependence again as my example, here is the first part of the description of **Interdependence**:

We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.

There is no action in that statement, only **thought** or **belief**.

Each of the values in Article II have the same format: first a belief statement, then followed by a moral code expressed as a covenant.

Why no creeds? One creed in particular, The Apostles Creed, is an example of the reason we never accepted creeds, "**I believe** in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell." And it goes on to tell the whole story that was written down in the early days of Christianity.

The most interesting aspect of the Apostle's Creed to me is its staying power, having little changed over the centuries. It reached its current form 1200 years ago [750 AD]. It is a story of **creation by revelation**, using divine or supernatural explanations to explain human existence and the natural world. Many religions have held on to their traditional creedal roots, but not us.

The early American congregationalists had just come through the Scientific Revolution, where **reason** was replacing **revelation** as the basis of knowledge. And they were smack dab in the middle of the Enlightenment period, where these same scientific principles were being applied to social and cultural thinking. So creedal thinking was not in vogue.

So it's no wonder that we rejected the creeds of Christianity back then. It wasn't until 1961 that our Principles were written down, probably to cement the union of Unitarians and Universalists under some kind of common **belief** system. They were written down, but they were not considered creeds. Why not??

Of all the 7 principles, I think our most foundational one is "**a free and responsible search for truth and meaning**". I say this partly because the most famous sermon in all of Unitarianism, the Baltimore Sermon, given by Rev. William Ellery Channing in 1819 titled "Unitarian Christianity", really defined what Unitarianism was at that time and place, and it was all about interpreting the bible using **reason**. I believe that all our other beliefs rely on a search for truth. But truth is always changing, never constant. For example, there was one "**true**" explanation of human origins before Darwin, and a very different one after. Change is hard – some people still argue for the creationist story.

One aspect of creeds is that they tend to last forever. With the search for truth as our tradition, we cannot commit to "**forever**". Thus we can say that we have **beliefs** but they do not rise to the level of **creeds**. Change is explicitly one of our Values, called **Transformation**: Here is the belief statement followed by the covenant statement for Transformation:

We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

As a counter example to change, the 10 commandments are still the same as they were 2000 years ago, but in my 16 years of being a UU I have never heard a sermon on them. Same for my 30 years as a member of a Jewish congregation. Their relevance seems to be ignored or long past.

Some commandments have been taken out of religion and incorporated into secular laws – *killing and stealing*, for example. Some others have fallen by the wayside – *Keep the sabbath holy* – remember when we had the “blue laws” where stores couldn’t open on Sunday? That was before we had families with 2 working adults. Other commandments leave today’s generation scratching their heads – *Honor thy father and thy mother??*. I can even remember wondering what that one meant as a child.

For better or worse – decide for yourself – the 7 Principles of 1961 only lasted 65 years before they were replaced in the UUA Bylaws with the 7 Covenantal Values. This is an example of change pushed by new cultural awareness, **and** a willingness to leave the past behind. Leaving the past behind has both an upside and a downside. The upside is that our values are constantly being aligned with modern norms, **“truth” triumphs**; the downside is that change is hard and not easily accepted.

Let me sum up what I have said. Three characteristics define **religious** community: **Rituals, Commandments, and Beliefs**. By using these 3 criteria, I have come to believe that Unitarian Universalism is not a derivative religion, not a **kind** of Christianity, or a **kind** of **Judiasm**, or a **kind** of **Buddhism**. I believe that UUism is as different from any of these as they are from each other, given the nature of our **Rituals, Commandments, and Beliefs**.

And finally let me end today by saying something **typical of** UUism, which is: think on these things, and **come to your own conclusion**.

Let it be so, and Ahmen.

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Closing words are partly by Shari Woodbury & partly by Kathy Huff:

Let us continue to grow as citizens of our communities, our nation, and our world. Our time in this place may have ended, but our connection to each other and this community remains. Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, tread gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion. Until we meet again, blessed be.

Call to worship

“Unitarian Universalism *is* a chosen faith. Even for those of us who grew up Unitarian or Universalist or Unitarian Universalist, there was a time when we had to choose this faith for ourselves. There is tremendous power in this, in knowing that we are here because we want to be, because we are committed to sharing our religious journeys with each other, committed to sharing our lives with one another.”

ADDENDUM

A section of our Article II called "**Freedom of Belief**" reflects this heritage.

In essence, the flaming chalice is a powerful symbol of faith in action, freedom of belief, and shared values, uniquely suited to the diverse and evolving nature of Unitarian Universalism. (chatGPT)

[The flaming chalice combines the symbolism of fire [often represents sacrifice, love, and truth] with the idea of a chalice [or cup, often associated with sharing in community].

The problems of this creed for Unitarians in 17xx were the following:

The divinity of Jesus

The Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The concept of Hell

God's all-powerful judgement on the living and the dead

The Communion of Saints

The forgiveness of sins

Resurrection of the body

Life everlasting

Our UU rejection of creeds is historical, long before Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, when we created our 7 Principles. By calling these ideals Principles, the authors could continue to maintain that we had no Creeds.

THE APOSTLES CREED I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit; Born of the Virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate; Was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven; And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body; And the life everlasting. Amen. THE NICENE CREED I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one

substance with the Father, through Whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man: Who for us, too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried: the third day He rose according to the Scriptures, ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father: He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son: Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified: Who spoke by the prophets. And I believe one holy, Christian, and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and life of the age to come. Amen.

Creeds are ideals.

Simply put: “A **Creed** is an idea or belief that members of a faith community affirm to be **true**.” Is there no idea in our community that we hold to be true? I think that is a stretch.

I think it was Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living”. I want to amend it to say, “The unexamined church is not worth joining”. So with your permission, I want to examine our church, more specifically our most unique proposition – that we have **No Creeds**.

Our Sunday service often starts out with the slogan, “We are a Covenantal religion, and not a Creedal religion”, meaning that we have Covenants and no Creeds. Most people would take this comment at face value, but not me, and I came across a book that seemed at odds with that supposition.

The textbook is called “America: Religions and Religion”, by Catherine L. Albanese, PhD, Distinguished Professor Emerita in Comparative Religions at UCSB. Among other topics, the book outlines the main characteristics of ANY religion.

Every religion has four defining characteristics, which all begin with the letter “C”, hence they are called the 4 C’s. I will define each one in detail shortly, but briefly they are **Creeds, Codes, Cultuses, and Community**.

Now, I want to emphasize that these 4C’s represent an academic analysis of religions superimposed on the top of the religion itself. It represents the process used by comparative religious scholars to compare and contrast many different religions, from ancient to modern, from church-based to small spiritual-practice groups.

This analysis is not from *practitioners* of the religion; for example, in 1961 when Unitarians and Universalists joined together, they didn't sit around and ask, "Now what are our **creeds?**, what are our **codes?**, what are our **cultuses?**"? Instead, these elements have arisen naturally as part of religious evolution. In the case of UUs they specifically claimed that they had no **Creeds**.

Here are the definitions of each of the 4 C's:

"A **Creed** is an idea or belief that members of a faith community affirm to be **true**."

Simply said, a **Creed** is a statement of belief.

"A **Code** is a rule that governs everyday life." Think **code of conduct, moral code, or ethical code**.

Simply said, a **Code** is a statement of action.

The third C is **Cultuses**, which is a real word, just not in common usage. It basically is referring to religious Rituals. We have a few religious rituals; but we are not ritual-heavy compared to others. Lighting our Chalice is our best-known ritual, but other elements of our service are also pretty standard across congregations, and we have special services like Flower Communion and Water Communion. I don't think Rituals are controversial, so I will not say any more today about **Cultuses**.

The 4th C is for **Community**, which will only occur, according to *Albanese*, when the other 3 C's are in place. Clearly **Community** is a strong value here, and I don't need to say more about it.

Let's look at **Creeds** and **Codes** in more detail:

One example of each in Christianity is illustrative here.

The Apostles Creed begins like this, "**I believe** in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell." Etcetera.

The best known Judeo/Christian **Codes** are embodied in the 10 commandments, with statements like, "*Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not commit adultery*". These are statements of action.

In her book, Albanese makes the following important point about **Creeds**, “The religious creed provides an intellectual rationale for why people act in the religious way they do”. That is a very academic statement; Simply said, **Creeds** give meaning to the religion.

We think that Unitarian Universalism has no **Creeds** – that the lack of **Creeds** is **THE** defining proposition of our religion, which separates us from everybody else. How can we integrate that with the previous information?

The idea that Unitarianism has no **Creeds** is 250 years old. It starts with the Congregationalist churches in Massachusetts who did not agree with the Nicaea Creeds that were invented in 325 years after the crucifixion by the Roman Catholic Church. They disagreed with everything that was not in the Bible, and most importantly they disagreed with the idea of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or as we kids used to say, Holy Ghost) and with the idea that Jesus was divine. They started to be blastemized because of their non-belief, and were ridiculed with the name *Unitarian*; eventually the name stuck and their religion embraced the name Unitarian.

The Unitarian religion, over time, formally renounced all **Creeds**, which has led to the common idea that “ We Unitarians can believe anything we want”. Of course, we have all heard enough sermons to know that this is not really true.

Let's turn now to the 7 original Principles of UUism and see how they fit in the 4C's.

Like the Apostle's Creed that starts with “*I believe*”, I am going to preface each Principle with the words, “*We believe in*” to see how they fit a **Creed**:

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

So clearly the 7 Principles are all statements of beliefs; they contain no action verbs, and hence no specific action. So they must represent **Creeds** in a scholarly analysis in comparative religion.

As we all know, our parent organization has replaced the 7 Principles in Article II with 7 new Values. How do the new Values fit into the framework of the 4C's?

All the Value descriptions have the same structure; let me illustrate with one example:

Interdependence is the first Value

Every Value description consists of 2 paragraphs. Here is the first one for Interdependence:

We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.

And here is the second part:

We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

I submit that the first part of each Value is a statement of belief, a **Creed**, and the second part is a statement of action, a **Code**. Any statement that begins with “We covenant...to do something” implies an action and is therefore a **Code**.

So each Value in the new Article II is basically a **Creed** in the first paragraph, and a **Code** in the second paragraph. They could not fit with the concept of the 4Cs any better if they were specifically designed to do so. I invite you to re-read them yourself with this idea in mind and see how it feels to you.

So friends, I propose that the idea that Unitarian Universalism has no **Creeds** is not realistic. We have plenty of **Creeds** if you go looking for them. We don't call them **Creeds** because we are distancing ourselves from the Christian **Creeds**, and we reject the idea of all **Creeds**. We can take some comfort in the fact that we are not the first religion to be self-unaware.

And thank goodness that we have **Creeds**, even though they are maybe light-weight **Creeds**!! Without **Creeds** there would be no meaning to our religion, and no reason for us to gather together here today.

So let us continue to gather, let it be so, and AAAhmen.

Now, as we all know, a **cult** is used as an arbitrary sociological distinction that marginalizes or stigmatizes certain groups as less religiously authentic than others. It is worthwhile to remember that “One person's religion is another person's cult”.

“A **creed** is a formal statement of beliefs or doctrines that members of a faith community affirm to be **true**.” I think **true** is the operative word here – because we aspire to a free and responsible search for **truth** and meaning, which runs counter to some formal doctrine of **Truth**. There are two main **Creeds** in Christianity:

“**The Apostles’ Creed** – an early summary of Christian beliefs, often used in liturgy.”

“**The Nicene Creed** – a foundational creed developed in the 4th century to unify Christian belief about the Trinity.”

More about the Trinity later, but now, for better or worse, we proudly score a **NO** on **Creeds**.

The second C is for **CODES**. **Codes** don't mean secret handshakes or signals, or speaking in tongues. Again from ChatPGT: “A **code** (often called a **code of conduct**, **moral code**, or **ethical code**) refers to a set of rules, principles, or laws that guide how followers of the religion are expected to behave.” This clearly describes the intent of our Principles and Values, so we score a strong **YES** on **Codes**.

The third C is for **Cultuses**, which are “Acts of worship like prayer, offerings, sacrifices, or festivals.” Another name is **Rituals**. Here we score a moderate **YES**, based on our Sunday Services and especially the standard ones like the Water Communion, Flower Communion, Music Sundays, and Christmas Eve services, along with our other festivals that bring us together. I think that we are much less based on rituals than some other religions, like Judaism and Catholicism.

The last C stands for **Community**. The previous three C's hold together a group of individuals who share a common understanding and world view, and become a community in the process.

So I conclude that we are a Religion, THANK GOD, but I want to spend the last part talking about the part we are missing: **Creeds**.

Albanese makes the point that “religious creed provides a rationale for why people act in the religious ways that they do”.

When I first joined UUFSD, I had more questions than answers. It turns out that my questions, in 15 years of listening, have never been fully answered. In true UU fashion, we are left to resolve most questions for ourselves; any answer is OK. It fits the old UU meme, “You can believe anything you want”.

Well, I'm going to give you my answers to some questions today, but of course, please remember that "You can believe anything you want".

What makes Unitarian Universalism a Religion? Or, said more broadly, what makes any -ism a religion?

This question is not as ridiculous as it sounds: one large segment of our congregation considers itself to be Humanist, which is actually defined by Wikipedia as a philosophy and not a religion. The same for theism, deism, atheism, and all the other -isms. None of them by themselves is a religion. So how and when does an -ism cross over the line to become a religion? I used to think that belief in God or a higher power was required of a religion, but that would leave out Buddhism, which Robin Mitchell was adamantly against.

Why are we called Unitarians?