

Covenant not Creed - Renee Hills 14th August 2016



A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales.

The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small.

The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale.

Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.

The little girl said, "When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah".

The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

The little girl replied, "Then you ask him".

<http://gatewaytojesus.com/humorouschurchstories.html>

We laugh at this snapshot of two people with very different belief systems in a relatively harmless conflict: the little girl with her unshakeable belief in the bible story, heaven and hell and the teacher with her belief in science and facts.

We can't help forming beliefs: from beliefs about politics, parenting, or the best way to pack a suitcase or make a cup of tea.



The problem arises when we become stuck in our beliefs.

To quote Rev Meredith Garmon on his blog *The Liberal Pulpit*:

‘A belief is like a stopping point in the unfolding of learning. A belief is a mental stuck place in the flow of awareness. We have to have them – but we also need to be ready to replace any of them.’



One of the people who Unitarians trace their lineage from is the 16th century Michael Servetus, a Spanish theologian, physician, cartographer and Renaissance humanist.

He was the first European to correctly describe pulmonary circulation. He was adept at mathematics, astronomy, geography, jurisprudence, translation, poetry and he studied the Bible in its original language.

He objected strongly to the concept of the trinity. He said the trinity is a 'diabolical monster with three heads' and that Jesus Christ 'is not the Son of God from eternity'. Servetus was very attached to these beliefs and published them in a book when he was only 20.

Roman Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea (Nikea) to settle once and for all the arguments and divergent opinions about whether Jesus was divine or not and in what way. The Emperor had flung in his lot with Christianity but now he needed a uniform, stable religion in his far flung empire.

But there was a priest in Alexandria named Arius who we could claim as an even earlier fore-runner of Unitarian theology. He had widespread support for the idea that God was above Jesus; that Jesus' wisdom and teachings were more important than his death and resurrection.

There were arguments and riots in the market place between those who agreed and disagreed. The Emperor needed a calm kingdom – hence the Council of Nicea.

In the end Arius was not even allowed to speak before the Council as he was only a priest, not a bishop. His writings and poetry though were roundly condemned and the Creed was written.

The Nicene Creed became a doctrinal statement of correct belief. It explicitly affirmed that Jesus was the Divine Son of God, equal to God. A later version in 381 was expanded to deal with continuing dissension and it enshrined the concept of the Holy Ghost – bingo now we have the trinity!

So the Creed held the dominant immutable beliefs of Christianity.



About 300 years later on the Arabian Peninsula, in 610 the Prophet Mohammed began to have visions delivered by the archangel Gabriel in the cave of Hira

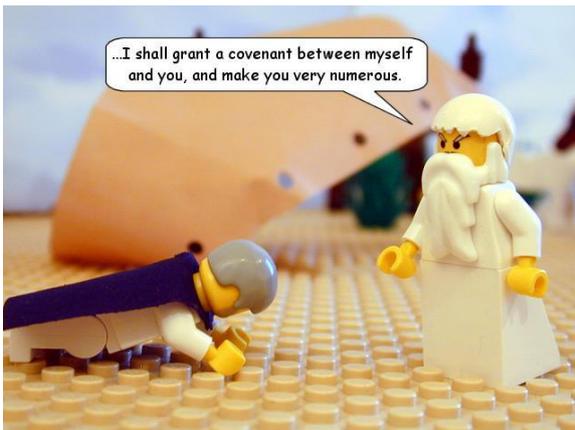
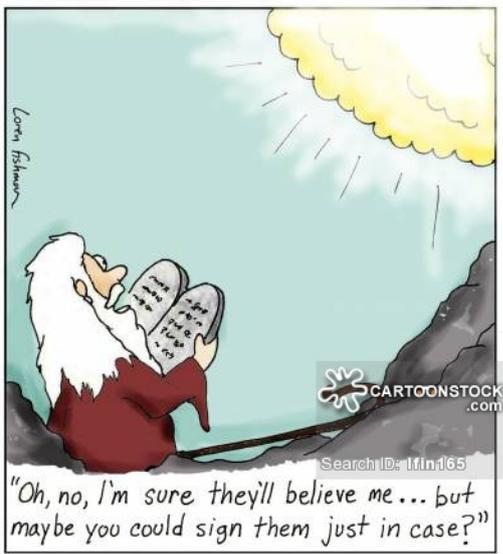
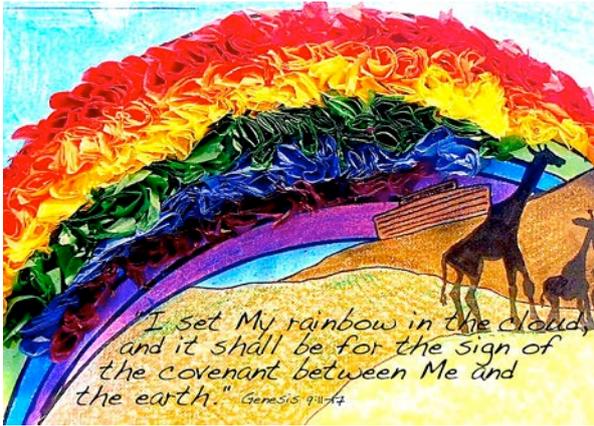
The Arabian tribes were pagan and warring, and seeing that God (Allah) had given the Romans and Jews a book, Mohammed wished for a revelation for his people, to unite them and give them truth.

He felt that the Christian monotheism was too complex, with the God the father, the holy spirit and Jesus. Also he believed it was an abomination to worship a person.

So we have the Moslem creed, the Shahadah, (Sha-hada) which is "There is only one God and Mohammed is his prophet." It's a direct repudiation of the concept of Jesus as God. He is explicitly stated as a prophet, like Moses and Isaiah et al.

So creeds/beliefs won the day in Islam as well as Christianity

In the Jewish tradition though, there is a strong history of covenants.



The Davidic Covenant

- An eternal kingdom
- Dynastic rule
- The Messiah
- The Temple, built by his son, Solomon: the sign of God's abiding presence and favour.



So, in summary, as a gross oversimplification, Jews have a covenant with God.

Christians and Muslims have beliefs/creeds about God and UUs have a covenant WITH EACH OTHER.

We're not the only tradition that is non-creedal. UCC are also non-creedal and many Protestant churches are also moving more towards non-creedal worship.



UU's say: everybody needs to believe something but there isn't any **one** thing that we all have to believe together at the same time. We opt out of creed sharing. 'We do not have to think alike to love alike.'

From Garmon again:

Covenant, however, is not optional.

Covenant is essential.

A covenant is a promise – a promise that continues to hold us, no matter how many times we break it.

WHAT ABOUT UU Covenants?



From the UUA website:

- There is no supernatural authority for the covenants we use in our worship.
- There are no scriptural texts or creedal statements that claim divine origins or sanctions.
- Our covenants have not been passed down from an ecclesiastical hierarchy that claims to represent divine authority.

Our covenants come instead from the hearts and minds of our people.

- They may have been composed and introduced into worship by ministers;
- they may have been created by lay leaders, individually or through a group process.
- Some have been affirmed by a congregational vote; others have become traditions through regular use.

7 Principles

For the last few decades our most important UU covenant has been the seven principles.

The full preamble to the principles reads: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, **covenant** to affirm and promote” -- and what follows are our familiar seven principles.



According to Rev Preston Moore, the preamble convenes a community built around these principles.

It opens a continual conversation about how they apply in the world.

Each member congregation grants permission to all the others to call it to account for making these principles real.

This covenant of accountability is mirrored in the relationship among the individual members of each congregation.

(**“Promises, Promises”** a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists Williamsburg, VA
November 12, 2006)

The BUUF Covenant

I am not sure when our own covenant was adopted in Brisbane. I do remember tweaking the language a little a few years ago.

I was interested to discover that the words on which it is based first appeared in a book published in Boston by Rev Griswold Williams in 1933.

Tucked away in the back of the book, after the 101 readings and before the acknowledgements and index was a single page titled 'A Covenant'.

It read:

**“Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow
Into harmony with the divine.
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.”**

These words reflected the evolution of language of the times. Our covenant is an aspirational covenant – it calls us to do something to help the world; to help ourselves.

It is a place where we bring our individual search for truth and meaning; it helps motivate ourselves and each other to bring love to the world, to be the best we can be.

Our covenant words resonate deeply with me. I remember barely being able to read the words in some services because of the way they touched me and spoke to newly discovered sense of community, freedom, and support.

What does covenant mean to us personally?

Basically covenant is a promise

“Promises, Promises” a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Williamsburg, VA November 12, 2006

To quote Rev Moore again – he said the theologian Martin Buber describes humans as promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-remaking creatures.

I find this idea such a loving take on human nature. Don't we all know the reality of breaking a promise to someone else or having them break one with us and then working to find a way to rebuild the connection or relationship.

I searched for an image to put with this idea and the screen was full of guilt inducing messages such as “A Promise means everything but Once it's broken, sorry means nothing.’ Or ‘Promise is a Big Word. If you break it, it will also break a lot of others words as well, eg trust.’

But a covenant is something a little bit different. Whatever happens, it is holds another opportunity to grow, to learn. The covenant holds that space, welcoming us back.

I love the song Come, Come Whoever you Are.

It's from a poem by the Sufi scholar Rumi and our version has left out a beautiful line:

Come, come, whoever you are.

Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.

It doesn't matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.

Come, yet again, come, come.

To quote Rev Garmon again:

That additional line, “even if you have broken your vows a thousand times,” speaks to the nature of covenant. We fail. We fail in inevitable and daily ways to fully embody, to be fully present to the love that we have promised.

Sometimes we even fail in heartrending ways to be the supportive presence we promised to be...to our family, friends, our congregation.

It doesn't matter, says Rumi. Come, yet again, come.

Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, the vows still stand, broken but strangely unweakened, beckoning, inviting, calling, urging, whispering: return, re-commit, renew the heart's promise of presence and connection. Come, yet again. Come.

That's what covenant means. It's timeless and unconditional.

The idea of covenant holding the space for those moments in life when we try to move from promise to commitment greatly appeals to me. (and it's not my idea – I watched some GA videos on the topic)

Just as an aside: Whenever I hear the word commitment I think of this humorous take on commitment vs involvement! I thought I'd share it with you!



<https://www.braintrustgroup.com/scrum-the-chicken-and-pig-story/>



But when you think about it, moving from promise to commitment is usually done in a moment in time; a decision point where we choose to act or not to act; to make good choices or not; to speak out or not.

These moments change us; they can change the way we think and they can change the world.

Sometimes they are very significant life moments – could be when witnessing a wedding; or when we make a promise to another person; or deciding to join a social justice cause; or reach out to another person.

It could be the moment when we decide not to gossip; or to speak out against an injustice; or to take action to deepen our spiritual life.

What a gift to have the space and sense of community provided by the covenant as we negotiate these moments.

I'd like to share a covenant moment with you now from film.

Lord of the Rings clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrJJ6ncp1fc> forming the fellowship in LOTR

This is a covenant moment. Evil is creeping over all the known world. A special meeting of all the disparate leaders is called.

All want to save the world. All have capacity. But they all begin arguing.

It is Frodo who steps forward and says 'I will take the ring.' He puts himself forward and commits to an action for the collective



good.

The 'I' becomes 'We'. It may mean surrendering a personal agenda for something larger. It certainly meant that for Frodo

Right Relations/Healthy Relationships Covenant

Our BUUF Committee has decided they would like to add another covenant to our Fellowship – a Right Relations or Healthy Relationships Covenant.

This is a behavioural covenant designed to clarify expectations and create a safe environment for relationships within our group.

A Right Relations Covenant can call members to listen attentively, express gratitude, value confidentiality, ask for help, respect different opinions and acknowledge that everyone makes mistakes.

(<http://www.uua.org/interconnections/143004.shtml>)

In essence, it affirms the dignity and worth of the individual by asking them to be responsible for what they do.

Such a Covenant would be a guide to take us into what looks like a promising future.

There are many useful models available from other congregations and fellowships.

We've just received a copy of an excellent model used by UU's in Auckland. The Perth congregation may adopt it, although they are also looking at another model.

It has headings such as:

We will be mindful of how we communicate with and about others.

We will seek a peaceful and constructive resolution process when conflicts arise.

We will celebrate the diversity within our community.

We will build the common good.

So what we plan to do is send out an email to everyone in our community inviting them to have input into this document.

If you'd like to part of that process, please speak to anyone on the committee: me, James, Helen, Rob or Adi, Helen, Lynne Hurst or Lynn Kelly.

And to mimic the words of Lord Elrond, may our Fellowship prosper!