

Laughing Matters: What UU Jokes Tell Us about Ourselves

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I'd like to start today with an observation: reflecting on UU jokes is a hugely popular sermon topic. While carrying out research for the earlier version of today's sermon back in 2010, I found a number of previous sermons as well as web page after web page with joke collections. We both laugh at ourselves and observe that others poke fun at us. Our reactions run the gamut from amusement to self-consciousness to defensiveness, if my reading was at all representative.

Now, jokes are a good thing. Laughing matters, and sometimes it's good to be a laughing matter, whether someone else's laughing matter or our own. But in keeping with our quest to learn more about the world and ourselves, it's never a bad idea to ask what the humor's all about. Let's laugh at ourselves, yes, let's take ourselves lightly and let's welcome the publicity we may get when other people tell their jokes. But for today, let's also take seriously just what's going on with UU humor. I'll do so first by sharing a number of additional jokes with you, then by coming to a conclusion that may not be quite so funny and asking what we can do about it. There are, of course, some mean jokes out there, but I won't be telling those today.

If we were to take the rather long list of UU jokes and try to organize them topically or thematically, what would we find? What would a sociology of UU jokes look like?

First, lots of UU jokes differentiate us from other religions, particularly Christianity. Replacing the Ten Commandments with the Ten Suggestions highlights our lack of creed, as does the following joke: a Catholic and a UU get into a car accident, and it looks like they may be done for. A priest and a UU minister arrive on the scene. The Priest asks the Catholic, "Do you believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost?" The UU minister asks the UU, "Do you believe in open inquiry, social justice, and world community?"

Some jokes also gently or not so gently chide UUs for our failure to understand or accept other marks of traditional Christian religion. The joke naming UU sacraments as doubt, argument, and voting, suggests that we somehow don't understand what is "really" sacred." The idea that "reduce, reuse, recycle" might be our holy trinity makes the same point, as does the UU understanding of Easter. You all know what Easter means to UUs, right? It's when Jesus comes out of his tomb and if he sees his shadow he goes back in and we get six more weeks of winter.

Then there's the Bible. One online UU joke page lists several religious holy books. Jews have the Torah. Christians have the Bible. Muslims have the Qu'ran. And UUs have Roberts' Rules of Order. But that's not entirely fair. We do have the Bible, and sometimes we have Bible study. To which, like Thomas Jefferson, we are invited to bring our scissors. Here, the point seems to be that we don't treat the Bible as received sacred wisdom, but rather as material from which we can, to quote 12-step programs, take what we want and leave the rest. The implication is that we can't possibly see the Bible as sacred if we are willing to take scissors to it, whether literally or metaphorically. Oh, and note also that in the joke as told by Cindy, it is presumed that the UU will own a pair of scissors, but not necessarily that they will own a Bible. The Bible is also a good source of jokes about UUs missing the point, such as the one about the UU who tried to read the New Testament but stopped because the hero died halfway through it.

What about God? The ten commandments/ten suggestions joke indicates our lack of an external authority to who we are supposed to be accountable. The joke about how UUs would respond to news of an impending flood – namely by teaching classes on how to live underwater – suggests several things about us. We are practical. We are sometimes worryingly idealistic. But also, we don't trust God to take care of us; we only trust our own actions. It's also been said that UUs believe in "one God, at most," or in "one God, more or less." These latter two jokes suggest, incidentally, that we are neither theistic nor unified in our beliefs. But we knew the second part of that already. Then there are those two, quite telling prayers Cindy mentioned earlier: "Dear God, if there

is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul.” That one pokes fun at our skepticism, while the “To Whom it May Concern” prayer gets at our lack of connection with a personal deity.

But it’s not fair to speak only of what UUs don’t believe. What *do* we believe? What are our priorities? Our values? Our commitments? In what do we place our trust?

First, politics. There are a ton of jokes suggesting that UUs have replaced religious creeds with political ones, and organized religion with political organizing. Cindy mentioned the Holy Trinity joke above, where reducing, reusing, and recycling, replace the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Funnier, to me anyway, is the League of Women Voters joke, because if wisdom comes from the mouth of innocents, then the UU child in the joke may be on to something. She doesn’t understand what UUism is, at least not enough to identify as one. But she’s pretty sure her family belongs to the Church of the League of Women Voters, amen. Or ah-women, as the case may be. Then, of course, there’s the fact that voting is one of the three sacraments.

Next, discussion. Boy do we believe in discussion, according to dozens and dozens of UU jokes. Beyond noting that argument is one of the UU sacraments, I’ll limit myself to two jokes here, both more or less about the afterlife. In one joke, a UU has been in a car accident and someone in the crowd asks him if he wants a priest to give him last rites. The UU says he would rather have a UU minister conduct a discussion on last rites. The other joke picks up the UU post-death, as he is walking along a road. Eventually, he comes to a fork in the road. A sign indicates that heaven lies in one direction, but the UU heads off in the other direction. Why? The second sign directed him to “A Discussion about Heaven.”

UUs also treat logic, reason, and fact with great reverence. Here’s some sacred music that may get at this point better than any short joke. I’ll share a Christmas carol and an Easter hymn. Here’s the carol:

Gods rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay;
Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day;
When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say.
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, glad tidings of reason and fact.

Our current Christmas customs come from Persia and from Greece,
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.
This whole darn Christmas spiel is just another pagan feast!
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, glad tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem, there was no angels’ song;
There could not have been wise men for the trip would take too long.
The stories in the Bible are historically wrong.
O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, glad tidings of reason and fact!

Here’s the other one, which is just a single verse:

Jesus Christ may or may not have risen today. Alleluia! Whether or not he did is pretty difficult to say. Alleluia!
Let's discuss all sides of the issue thoroughly. Alleluia! We can take a vote! And then we'll see. Alleluia!

You’ll note, of course, that whether Jesus Christ rose is not a matter of faith but of a majority vote following a discussion in the latter hymn. Presumably the vote was carried out using Robert’s Rules of Order.

We believe in questioning. Oh, how we believe in questioning. We really do seem to accept, to quote one of our hymns, that “to question truly is the answer.” Thus the joke about the cross between a UU and a Jehovah’s Witness: someone who knocks on your door and asks what *you* believe. Or the joke about the UU billboard, in which we might theoretically advertise: all your answers questioned, which is certainly not what most other church billboards would say. The common “question mark” jokes, many of which seem to involve the Ku Klux

Klan, also get at this point. Then there's a wonderful joke about the woman who walks into a fabric store and asks the clerk for nine yards of material, explaining that she'll be using it to make a nightgown for herself as a present for her husband. The clerk says, "But nine yards is way too much material for a nightgown." The woman says, "I know, but my husband is a UU and he would rather seek than find."

We also fervently believe in the individual search for meaning and the sacred right of every individual to determine what is spiritually true for them. This, theoretically, is what makes us bad hymn singers, since we are always reading ahead to see whether we agree with the words. This is also why a UU would cross the road to support the chicken in its search for its own path. And, of course, it explains why, asked how many UUs it takes to change a light bulb, the UUs choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb.

Finally, though, we ought to get serious. Politics, discussion, reason, seeking, and individual religious freedom are all well and good but we have not addressed that ultimate source of meaning for UUs, the way, the truth, and the lightly sugared: coffee. Coffee: that which is so core to us that the UUA excommunicates us by taking it away. Coffee: one of the reasons the UU crossed the road when she wasn't supporting the chicken. Coffee: the reason the UU saved the coffee pot during the church fire, while the Catholic Church was saving the crucifix and the synagogue was saving the Ark of the Torah. The list of UU coffee jokes goes on and on and on. There's even a marvelous hymn, a parody of "Holy, Holy, Holy" called "Coffee, Coffee, Coffee." I'd like to inflict it on you now if I may. It's by UU Christopher Raible:

Coffee, Coffee, Coffee, praise the strength of coffee. Early in the morn we rise with thoughts of only thee.
Served fresh or reheated, dark by thee defeated, brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

Though all else we scoff we come to church for coffee. If we're late to congregate, we come in time for thee.
Coffee our one ritual, drinking it habitual, brewed black by perk or drip instantly.

Coffee the communion of our Uni-Union, symbol of our sacred ground, our one necessity.
Feel the holy power at our coffee hour, brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

To sum up, we have a marvelous collection of UU humor that we can enjoy, both in its excesses and in its grains of truth, which I hope are not coffee grains. Pretty good, right? Now most sermons on this topic end by encouraging us to celebrate the quirky truths about who we are and to be glad we've found a liberal religion that works so well for us. But you know me – I like to complicate things. So, here's the slightly less amusing side of all these UU jokes.

Ever wonder why so few people are UUs? We have terrific values. We stand on the side of love. We encourage free thinking. We do our best to respect everyone. Why are we such a small association of congregations? Do we have an advertising problem? Is it just our deep-seated fear of evangelizing, of spreading our good news? Perhaps that's a lot of it. But maybe there's something else as well.

If we looked at the above jokes as a kind of cultural barometer, what would they say about what others think of us? Equally important, what grains of truth in these jokes do we seem to accept as reasonably accurate?

To sum up, in no particular order: We worship coffee, not God. We have suggestions rather than commandments. We value individualism over community. Our moral structures are political rather than monotheistically ethical. We care more about the search for truth than the truth. And so on. In short, we don't look like a religion to people whose definition of religion is based on Christianity, traditional Judaism, or Islam. Maybe we have a hard time growing as a religion because people don't experience us as one. Maybe, at least if we care about growing, all those wonderful quirks about us become a bit less of a laughing matter.

Now, I know how unfair that is. We sing hymns like "Spirit of Life." We make a commitment to letting the little light inside of ourselves shine. Plenty of us would actually consider ourselves spiritual, even if plenty of the rest

of us would not. And, of course, we meet in a church setting, to do something we call worshipping, even if some of us are made uncomfortable by that term. So what's the problem?

Join me for a moment in reconsidering the beautiful opening reading from today, "This House." What does it say about this house in which we meet? The reading describes our congregation, and every other congregation out there, as a "house for friendships," a "house of freedom" that offers "a platform for the free voice," a place for scientists, a "house of art," a "house of prophecy," and a "cradle for our dreams." Very lovely. But do you see where I'm going with this? There is only one sentence in the entire reading that most people would identify even somewhat with religion, the place where our congregation is described as "a house of truth-seeking...where mystics can abide in a community of searchers." Even there, the truth might differ for each person, the mysticism highlights individuality, and the search is more important than the outcome. Don't get me wrong: we in this room find no problem with that. But maybe these aspects of liberal religion make it easier for other people to see it as liberal, and harder for them to see it as religion.

If we care about this, if we want more people to take us seriously and find in us a good home, I think we have to be comfortable using language that resonates with other people's understandings. We need to convince others that there is more here than coffee and conversations about heaven. And the good news, I think, is that we are already equipped to do so without having to sacrifice our individual perspectives on the altar of doctrinal conformity. Indeed, there is some language we already hold in common and that I imagine most of us find at least somewhat comfortable. We have our mission statement and we have hymns such as those we sang today. What does our mission statement tell us about ourselves as a religion? What do our hymns say of our hopes and dreams, our faith and trust?

First, the mission statement. We seek to nurture a religious community. There it is, right up front: we call ourselves a religious community, not a secular community or a political community. But what do we mean by the term "religious" in this context? I'll go out on a limb here and say we mean that we are a community that pays attention to matters of deep human importance, particularly our individual and mutual commitment to growing towards wholeness. We are at our religious best here when we are learning and stretching and risking and opening our hearts and minds and spirits. And we do this in a hundred ways: through Sunday worship, through committee work, through adult religious education, through being "in the back with the kids," through all that non-committee service work, through listening and speaking and singing and doing, through living with and sometimes struggling with the meaning of covenant. These actions are our sacraments, outward manifestations of an invisible grace, of the spirit of life in each of us.

Our mission is also to inspire spiritual growth, about which I've just made a couple of points. But let me say something more directly: human growth is spiritual growth. We UUs do not subscribe to the doctrine that the sacred and the mundane are separate entities. We have found that wonder, connection, humility, gratitude, empathy and joy can come to us in a wide variety of ways, invited and uninvited. Anything we do that orients us toward these ways of being in the world contributes to our spiritual growth because it contributes to our human growth. Far from it being a limit that we do not have specific, restricted ways to engage with the fullness of the universe, it is a great opportunity. One person may find in science the awe and mystery that moves her, as another may find it in music or Buddhist meditation or the poetry of Mary Oliver or service to the poor. As the Sufi mystic Rumi said, there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground. A newcomer to High Plains will find many of them on display right here.

Finally, our mission statement talks of acting for social justice. Aha, those joke-makers say, it's all true. These UUs really are the League of Women Voters in disguise. But let's not jump to conclusions about the meaning of social justice work. Religions the world over have a long and honorable history of incorporating what we today call social justice work in their theology and practices. In fact, a case could be made that social justice work comes to us from religion initially and that we find elements of it among the Jewish prophets, including Jesus, the Qu'ranic understanding of almsgiving, the Hindu practice of nonviolence, and the Buddhist cultivation of compassion, among other sources. True, some social justice work today looks pretty secular but even today liberal and mainline Christianity and most branches of Judaism carry out plenty of social justice work that they

see as directly tied to their sacred mandates. There would be no question about the religious legacy and legitimacy of social justice work were it not for decades of the Religious Right's trumpeting that social justice work is both secular and antireligious. We can't necessarily convince others that the Religious Right is wrong about this claim but we can certainly convince ourselves. Our social justice work comes out of our deepest convictions about the basic goodness of humanity and our desire for a world in which all people, indeed all beings, can thrive. This is a faith stance. We have seen precious little evidence that such a world can exist. Our work, our attempt to bring a world of blessing into existence, comes from our trust that we have not yet exhausted the possibilities for who we can be and what we can do. Is that a doctrine? No. But it is a spiritual hope.

Finally, a few words about today's hymns. It's interesting that I have not yet found any hostile UU jokes about the flaming chalice, which may signal a modicum of respect at least for this symbol. In today's chalice extinguishing words, we will remind ourselves that we carry the light of truth, the warmth of community, and the fire of commitment within ourselves, individually and collectively even when the chalice at the front of this sanctuary is not lit. We are to be living chalices, blazing the commitment of our beliefs through our lives, as Jason Shelton's hymn "The Fire of Commitment" reminds us. It's not about "commandments" versus "suggestions." It's about transforming ourselves and our world.

We sang "Spirit of Life" for our response. This hymn may be so oversung that it is easy to forget its power. But to be clear, we are inviting the Spirit of Life to come to us, a UU equivalent of inviting Jesus into our hearts. We are asking that the power of the universe stir compassion in our hearts and justice in our hands. We are asking to be grounded and freed that we might better be able to do the work before us. All those UU jokes? They don't get this part. They don't see that even simply the power of community is a power greater than any individual one of us. And it is that power, the spirit within us and among us that we invite to literally change our lives.

Finally, we will conclude shortly with the hymn "Go Lifted Up." I selected this closing hymn because it seems to me a beautiful UU prayer. Yes, folks, we do pray. We pray that those sitting next to us, those we like, those we barely tolerate, and those we don't know, will leave this place filled with lightness and love and peace, the better to continue walking our walk toward wholeness together and separately. If we're such a lousy religion, how come we get such a beautiful prayer to end our service? I don't buy it, UU joke-tellers.

Laughing matters, but so does the seriousness with which we take ourselves. If we want more people to see all that is marvelous about us, I think we have to be brave about treating the language we use as legitimately religious language. We can mean a hundred different things by "religious." But if people seek meaning and transformation and making a difference in the world, we have that here. We just have to tell our story better and in language that makes sense to others.

I'd like to end with a joke. You may remember it from Rev. Beatrice's column in this month's newsletter. Three clergy were discussing death and one of them said, "If you were in your casket and friends and family were gathered, what would you like to hear them say?" The Baptist preacher said, "I would like to hear them say that I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man." The Catholic priest said, "I would like to hear that I was a wonderful teacher and a servant of God who made a huge difference in people's lives." The UU minister said, "I would like to hear them say, "Look, he's moving!"

My friends, we are moving. We are far from dead, in body, spirit, or purpose. It's time to go show the world that if they think we are only about coffee and conversation, they could not be more wrong. It's time to let our light shine collectively as well as individually, that we may be ever more the place of love, compassion and challenge that the world needs. Amen, and blessed be.

Some of the UU Jokes Mentioned Above

Why did the UU cross the road? To support the chicken in its search for its own path.

What do you get when you cross a UU with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on your door and asks what you believe.

A UU family moves into a new neighborhood. Their little girls find a new playmate. One day, as they are playing together, the other girl says, "We're Episcopalians, what are you?" The UU child thinks for a minute and says, "I'm not sure, but I think we're League of Women Voters."

UUs are always afraid to move into Ku Klux Klan areas, lest the Klan burn question marks into their lawns.

How are UUs different from Christians and Jews? Christians and Jews have the 10 Commandments, and UUs have the 10 Suggestions.

Hearing that a great flood was coming, Christians prayed, Buddhists meditated, and UUs formed a class to learn how to live underwater.

Why are UUs the worst hymn singers? They are always reading ahead to see whether they agree with the words.

How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb? We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service. We explore a number of light bulb traditions including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to spiritual luminescence.

You might be a UU if you think the Holy Trinity is reduce, reuse, recycle.

A sign outside a UU church might read: Bible Study at 7:00 pm. Bring your Bible, if you have a Bible, and a pair of scissors.

How does the UUA excommunicate naughty members? It takes away their coffee.

UUs pray, "Dear God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul." Or they pray "to whom it may concern."

A billboard suggestion: UUism: where all your answers are questioned.

What are the three UU sacraments? Doubt, argument, and voting.