As many of you may recall, a little more than four months after being elected to his position by the College of Cardinals (two and a half years ago) in March, 2013, Pope Francis held an impromptu news conference on his airplane trip back from Brazil to the Vatican. For an hour and 20 minutes, he took questions from reporters accompanying him, and the final one related to homosexuality, clergy serving at the Vatican, and larger church doctrine.

The Pope’s answer: “If someone is gay and he searches for God and has good will, who am I to judge?” He was speaking in Italian but used the English word “gay.”

Traditional Catholic Church teaching has been one of offensive, harsh judgment (homosexuality is "intrinsically disordered"), and he has reaffirmed that homosexual acts are sinful.

“Who am I to judge?” That perspective, however, suggested that this new Pope was more open, more compassionate, and certainly more provocative than recent judgmentalism of the previous Pope who spoke of being gay as a “a tendency toward… an intrinsic moral evil.”

Yet, Pope Francis emphatically weighs in and judges on other issues.

1. In his encyclical on Climate Change last May, he affirmed that human activity was destroying the Earth and that we have a duty of care for the planet.
2. He called for conversion to renewable energy sources.
3. He described how the environmental crisis makes the poor its first victims.
4. He denounced a paradigm that elevated “blind confidence in technology” without a moral vision – a misplaced faith that “reality, goodness, and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power.” (“The Pope and the Planet,” Bill McKibben, NYRB, 8/13/15, p. 40)
5. He has emphasized economic injustice and speaks about the stench arising from idolatry of money, which “ruins society,” “enslaves men and women”, and creates a consumerist society that throws people away.
Pope Francis also makes a judgement and speaks out against capital punishment and continually reminds us of the powerful virtues of humility and service.

The Pope’s teachings please and offend conservatives and liberals, depending on the issue.

This morning, as I turn to his teaching and tradition and to our own, and to his recent visit in our city, I find some odd things that caught my attention.

Pope Francis believes that animals will go to heaven, a view shared and rejected at different times by different Popes.

Of total inconsequence: the Popemobile, or at least the one used here in New York, is a modified Jeep Wrangler.

On Friday night, in connection with the Mass held at Madison Square Garden, some of the ticket boxes and concession stands became temporary confessional booths. Hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken fingers, special chicken, and souvenir buttons and trinkets were available for purchase, at least during the concert that preceded worship, but not beer. Although Jesus liked wine, according to the story of the marriage at Cana, apparently wine was not for sale.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation ran some TV ads on the Stephen Colbert show and then a full page in the NY Times (9/24/15) taking issue with Roman Catholic Church’s efforts to “ban… contraception… worldwide”, to “bar” marriage equality and gay rights, to “criminalize abortion globally,” and to “force taxpayers to support religiously segregated schools”, while also denouncing a history of “coddling” clergy sexual predators.

The Pope addressed a joint session of Congress, which also for some felt like an egregious crossing of the boundary between church and state. But I would note that in January 1827, an evangelical, Congregational preacher by the name of Harriet Livermore gave a sermon to such a joint session. Then did so again in 1832, 1838, and 1843.

At that first occasion, she was speaking on behalf of women’s rights with a text: “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.”

“President John Quincy Adams was in the audience for her first sermon, and according to contemporary reports, many of her listeners were deeply moved: (Wikipedia) ‘Her language was correct, persuasive, and judging by my own feelings, the profound attention and sympathy of the audience, extremely eloquent. Many wept even to sobbing....” (Letter of...

Perhaps you recall that John Quincy Adams, the sixth U.S. President, was a Unitarian.

For me, I think we can do without either Ms. Livermore or the Pope addressing Congress.

Having been raised, sustained, and blessed by Unitarian Universalist faith throughout my life, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, I realize I do not have the same excitement as many do for this Pope’s visit. I appreciate elements of the Roman Catholic Church and this Pope, and similarly find some of its and his teaching difficult and objectionable, even in affirming religious toleration… my – our faith’s – affirmation of everyone’s right to believe as she or he chooses.

I confess that I caught a glimpse of the Pope … or more accurately, a glimpse of his small black Fiat on the FDR Drive, as he travelled from the financial center Heliport uptown toward St. Patrick’s Cathedral. And I watched some of the television coverage of some of the events.

I appreciated words of one priest on one of the TV stations who spoke of the excitement of those lining Fifth Avenue and elsewhere. He spoke about how we have no more Roman Emperors, imperial leaders, but we have in the Pope, a “living link” to Saint Peter over the past nearly 2000 years; that was his take on the “electricity.” And thus, by association Jesus is with us in Peter, and now in Francis. Could be, but not really for me….

Too often, I see, feel, a religion about Jesus, not the religion of Jesus. While Jesus probably greeted children warmly, the pageantry and theology of the Mass, the doctrines and dogma, and the patriarchy were not his calling cards.

Another commentator observed that Pope Francis has a special seductive appeal in his self-presentation, self-understanding, and spirituality, such as when he was speaking to Congress. Flattering us, not a bad opening move, Francis appealed to the greatness of the United States, the nation of immigrants, (I’m not sure he qualified that, and to be Native American or the descendant of a slave, you are still invisible). Nonetheless, he offers blessing and reminder, and then the challenge to sustain that generosity in the current crisis of migrants.

Also, he is winsome with his great smile and in asking for prayers for himself from the Capitol Building balcony facing the Washington Monument. He then said, as he
does often, “I ask you all please to pray for me. And if there are among you any who do not believe or cannot pray, I ask you to please send good wishes my way.” And I do send my good wishes.

Sister Simone Campbell is the activist nun and organizer of other nuns on behalf of the Affordable Care Act and immigration reform – and leader of “Nuns on the bus” – which first travelled through nine states in 2012 in opposition of the so-called “Ryan Budget” that decimated programs for the needy.

Sister Simone spoke at our Unitarian Universalist Annual delegate assembly in 2014, and soon said how much she liked Pope Frank… I am sure she said Pope Frankie, but that is not in the transcript… but she said she likes to call him Frank, rather than Francis, because she was fond of him. She expressed her appreciation for his emphasis on compassion rather than dogma and his emphasis on offering a helping hand rather than wagging a finger in judgement. And I too welcome what she embraces.

She summarized Pope Francis’ message as two things: (1) inequality is the source of evil, and (2) reality is more important than theories…. And by this she went on to describe the reality of those living on the margins, and their suffering, or abuse, and pain. She gave a call to “walk toward trouble” and to walk with those in need.

Put love to work…. Don’t be a jerk to others…. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. We are to walk together, all of us.

So, what is Francis’ personal history? His parents emigrated in 1929 from Mussolini’s Italy to Argentina where he was born in Buenos Aries. The eldest of five, he received a chemical technician’s license and worked in a lab, as well as having stints as a nightclub bouncer and a janitor sweeping floors.

He received college, seminary, and graduate education from Jesuit institutions, as an initiate and then entered the order at age 24, becoming a priest at age 33. He served as a professor of theology and supervisor of Jesuit novitiates; then as a provincial officer and rector of one of the Jesuit seminaries. He ran into some conflict with his superiors because he was focusing younger students on such things as direct pastoral care and popular religiosity, rather than the larger worldwide trend of Jesuits to focus on social action and sociological analysis.

Jesuits tend to welcome and attract independent-minded, disciplined, and brilliant members, and Pope Francis in that spirit, it seems, pushed back/dissent in ways counter to the larger culture of Jesuits.
Those differences isolated him from the hierarchy of his order, and he was asked not to live in/be part of a Jesuit house beginning in 1992, and he did not visit a Jesuit house again until becoming Pope in 2013. He had become an Auxiliary Bishop in Buenos Aires and rose to the position of Bishop, then Archbishop, then Cardinal – a path of hierarchal church service quite apart from typical history and practice of members of that order.

It was as a bishop in Buenos Aires that he expressed a simpler life style taking the bus, cooking his own meals, and choosing modest accommodations, while serving the poor of his diocese by doubling the number of priests serving in the slums. He reformed the financial workings of the archdiocese, cutting extravagant spending, and selling the archbishop’s mansion. He was also known as a theological conservative along with his concern for the poor.

He was elevated to Cardinal in 2001.

All this is just a bit of his personal history, with one additional minor note: His full title as Pope, which isn’t actually part of it, is:

_His Holiness Francis, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God._

So, again, who is the Pope? A lover of tradition and ritual, and a simple lifestyle, as well as a soccer fan. A servant leader especially for those on the periphery and margins of society. Open-minded – somewhat…

Regarding homosexuality, he answers, “Who am I to judge?” Choosing compassion over dogma. … a new thing.

Yet, despite his shout-out to the nuns and the women of the church at the vespers service at St. Patrick’s, patriarchy remains strong:

- Male-only priests;
- Women unlikely to be allowed to become priests.;
- Abortion likely to remain a grave sin.
- One hopes some measures of birth control, other than the rhythm method, would be permitted, so that women have greater control over their lives.

We continue to hear the invocation of God’s love for all persons, their inherent worth and dignity, but this affirmation fails when it comes to marriage equality and the
GLBTQ community. And he has yet to welcome divorced-remarried Catholics into good standing in the Catholic Church.

And the basic theology, supernatural/natural dualism, embraces an ancient world-view – with a few mythic corollaries:

- Jesus’ bodily resurrection,
- Mary’s virginity,
- the sacramental wafer and wine becoming the actual Body and Blood of Jesus,
- Sacrificial atonement with Jesus’ death as an expression of God’s love, plus the confusing doctrine of the Trinity.

These remain part of incomprehensible mysteries, not to be questioned. As the Council of Trent declared 450 years ago, such questions are “anathema.” Accept these on faith….

1600 years ago, Augustine, so deeply embraced as a Doctor of the Church, as well as a Saint, spoke of “the disease of curiosity,” of which I personally hope never to be “cured.”

As in our Responsive Reading from Sophia Lyon Fahs, “It matters what we believe.”

A couple of historians last year offered an analysis of the Four Big ideas of the Enlightenment that shape our modern society and our ideas, and that at times collide.

1. Individual Freedom undergirds Capitalism;
2. Socialism speaks for the dignity of all persons, community, and the common good;
3. Evolution embraces the scientific method, a this-worldly cosmology, and naturalism that opposes magical thinking, which we see in many religious traditions. And finally,

Applying this Enlightenment lens to religion, we clearly see our own Unitarian Universalist faith:

- Individual freedom of belief with gratitude and humility (over against ecclesiastical dogma and hierarchy);
Ethical imperatives to serve one another, welcoming each to the service of all, and building a just society;
An embrace of nature in its majesty and beauty with curiosity, and with appreciation for continuous revelation, rather than static, ancient revelations, some of which confound common sense; and
Democratic social structures that insist on collective decision-making, and on protecting the rights of minorities, over against top-down religions that sometimes are quite bossy.

Such Big Ideas are radiant and foundational in our tradition, not all of which, few of which, are so fully evident in the Pope’s tradition.

Despite all my theological differences, I do appreciate Pope Francis’ insistent focus on compassion and service – his deeds, works, values, and ethical leadership about what a good life ought to be, amid complexities of our lives.

Two more notes: In addressing Congress, Pope Francis invoked Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930s.

Robert Coles, the child psychiatrist, Harvard professor, and author, offers a story about what he learned from Dorothy Day, which for me is so akin to Pope Francis’ spirit:

Thirty years before... (Dorothy Day) died ... (Coles) came to the Catholic Worker [house] as a self-confident medical student to do volunteer work. Somebody pointed him to the kitchen where... (Day) and someone else were eating. They were in deep conversation. He waited. He knew enough about psychiatry to recognize that the person she was with was disturbed... somewhat incoherent. Day was completely engrossed.

"When they had both finished their lunch and their conversation, they got up, and I approached her," [writes Coles.] She could have certainly guessed that I was going to address her and not her companion. But what she said to me was, 'You wanted to speak with one of us...?'

"With one of us. Well, that took care of me. I don't think Harvard had anything more to teach me in four years than she had to offer me right then and there."

Sin and Freedom of Conscience

Finally, for today, to be continued next week, as we look at Salvation through Character, and “Deeds, not Creeds,” I came across, for me, a startling answer to a
question put to Pope Francis…. It is something I was aware of in Catholic teaching, but seldom hear about.

It was two years ago in an open letter to the editor of an Italian daily, general interest newspaper, who had posed some questions to the new Pope, especially about non-believers, like himself. The Pope answered:

“The issue for those who do not believe in God is to obey their conscience. Sin, even for those who have no faith, exists when people disobey their conscience.”

Not so different from the Pope on this, we Unitarian Universalists for 100+ years have not worried about going to heaven or hell, believing as we do that how we live here is what matters.

This day is ours… to be bold in our living and our loving, and in our giving and our forgiving, so that the world awaited becomes more nearly the world attained.

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1 “… shortly after he was elected, Francis flatly rejected the idea that the institution could benefit from opening itself to the hearts and minds of women. Asked about the issue of female priests, he replied, ‘The church has spoken and says no,’ adding, ‘That door is closed.’

‘Francis preaches against the elites while keeping the church an elite boys’ club.’