

Let's talk about creeds. The United Church of Christ is a non-creedal denomination, meaning that we intentionally invite members to figure out what their beliefs are, and live in tension *and* community with others of different beliefs. The reality is that most of us aren't in grave tension with one another, but it's still a stand with integrity, a position that privileges individual conscience over conformity. At the same time, we value membership in the great cloud of witnesses that is the Christian community across time and space, and so we do include in our hymnal the apostles' creed, the nicene creed, and some other statements of faith, so that our saying them can join us with our kindred in faith.

Of course, the UCC is very much a product of the Enlightenment, and can veer into hyper-rationality at times, so that we mistakenly view creeds only as doctrines for assent. Creeds *were* developed as ways to combat heretical teachings, but they're also supposed to function as proclamation, "scripture writ small," allusions to the extensive biblical texts. They're supposed to point us back to scripture, and let us hear ourselves saying them as a community. All this is to say that today's reading from Genesis was chosen as a reference to the first article in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." Think about the resonances.

The Apostles' Creed developed over time, but seems to have its origin in the mid-2nd century, when there was a very lively and viable form of Christianity that saw the material world as evil. The evil God of the Old Testament had created it, and Jesus had come to show us how to liberate ourselves from our carnal bodies and exist as pure spirits in the presence of the good and true God. To us now it seems ludicrous, but in the days when our faith was young, it was an open question, which teachers to listen to, how to understand the death and

resurrection of Jesus, what, if anything, to retain from the past. The Apostles' Creed is part of the pushback: it appropriates the Genesis creation stories (rather than rejecting the Hebrew scriptures) and implicitly affirms that the physical world is good, not corrupt and degrading.

There's a resonance from even earlier, though I don't know if 2nd century Christians knew about it, and that's the Genesis story as an alternative to its Ancient Near Eastern contemporaries. The Mesopotamian creation stories all had creation arising from a bloody war between gods whose characters were as self-serving as Donald Trump. Both creation stories in Genesis take that model and edit it severely so that a dignified and honorable God creates the world without any violence or bloodshed. This is how the creed can function as "scripture writ small," reminding us in one phrase ("creator of heaven and earth") of our ancestors' choices to align themselves with a God you can honor and trust, who created a beautiful, good world.

It can be useful to play around with the creeds and adapt them with insights from our own circumstances. So, for instance, Christians in Tanzania added to the second stanza of the Apostles' Creed, describing Jesus as "a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good." He was "always on safari doing good," meaning that he moved through the world watchfully, alert to opportunities to do good. That insight from Tanzanian kin enriches my image of Jesus.

But it's important to recognize that creeds arose out of conflict. They arose when people disagreed with each other, and neither compromise nor coexistence was possible. Either the church sees God's physical creation as the good product of a good God, or it sees physical reality as the corrupt and contaminating product of an evil God. And in these times, it may be necessary to make new statements of faith.

Our American context includes an upsurge in white “Christian” nationalism. It’s been lurking undercover for decades, certainly since the farm crisis of the 1980s, but Republicans’ appropriation of the mantle of “Christian” and the current occupant of the White House have given much more legitimacy to this movement. In 2018 at least six state legislatures passed laws mandating that every public school prominently display the U.S. motto, “In God We Trust.” This was part of a so-called legislative blitz, a model bill project conceived by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. The whole project is presented as an effort to preserve religious liberty in the US. Less savory, or less presentable allies of these efforts include the El Paso shooter and those who’ve attacked synagogues and mosques in the last couple of years. Christian nationalism is unamerican and unchristian, but it has tremendous appeal to many Americans who are aggrieved and resentful and feel out of control.

This last week, across my computer screen came a document from a group called “Christians Against Christian Nationalism.” The preamble says in part;

Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. We reject this damaging political ideology and invite our Christian brothers and sisters to join us in opposing this threat to our faith and to our nation.

It goes on to list “what we believe”:

- People of all faiths and none have the right and responsibility to engage constructively in the public square.
- Patriotism does not require us to minimize our religious convictions.
- One’s religious affiliation, or lack thereof, should be irrelevant to one’s standing in the civic community.
- Government should not prefer one religion over another or religion over nonreligion.
- Religious instruction is best left to our houses of worship, other religious institutions and families.
- America’s historic commitment to religious pluralism enables faith communities to live in civic harmony with one another without sacrificing our theological convictions.
- Conflating religious authority with political authority is idolatrous and often leads to

oppression of minority and other marginalized groups as well as the spiritual impoverishment of religion.

- We must stand up to and speak out against Christian nationalism, especially when it inspires acts of violence and intimidation—including vandalism, bomb threats, arson, hate crimes, and attacks on houses of worship—against religious communities at home and abroad.

The Baptists, bless their hearts, created this statement, but national leaders from many denominations have signed it, including our own UCC President John Dorhauer. But the real usefulness of the statement is when it is appropriated and repeated in many localities by local Christians. So I had to stop and think about whether it was polarizing and self-righteous to publicize this statement, or whether it was useful or necessary to speak out in this way. According to Daryl Johnson, a former security analyst with Department of Homeland Security's Office of Intelligence and Analysis, who's recently come out with a book on right-wing extremism, this dangerous bigotry has flourished because it's been ignored—ignored by defensive conservatives and by intimidated liberals. He told *The Guardian*:

Once you acknowledge it (white nationalist terrorism), then we can start gathering data on it. There's so much that needs to be done. We've rolled out all these programs worldwide to combat radical Islamic extremism. You counter-message. You go visit the mosque. You have suspicious activities reporting on people in your mosque who may be radicalized. Similar programs need to be rolled out that cover white nationalism.ⁱ

If visiting mosques and watching for radicalization is what you do about radical Islamic extremism, then that's probably what we have to do about white Christian nationalism. Name it, call it out, recognize where it's festering. So I guess I do think we need to spread this creed, or something like it, around—and claim it. As white, native-born Christian Americans, we have the responsibility to use our privilege on behalf of those who don't have it. It was probably polarizing and divisive to proclaim in the 2nd and 3rd century that God had created the heavens

and the earth, but it was time to fish or cut bait.

But I will tell you one other thing that Daryl Johnson said when I listened to an interview with him. And this is not a touchy-feely guy, by any means. But he said that we need to reach out and break isolating barriers with people who are attracted to this ideology, individual by individual, because that's how you fight dehumanization. There's no law that can accomplish that, no security policy, no economic incentive. We need to be clear about who we are *and* reach out to those who are defensive and hostile, fellow citizens and fellow Christians, and re-humanize ourselves and our brown, Muslim, Jewish kin. We need to be on safari to rehumanize one another and overcome isolation. May the Holy Spirit give us the skill and the insight to mend our broken American community.

When nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom,
the end is not violence:

for you are the God of resilient, redeeming love,
and your Brighter Purpose is at work in the shadows,
and the darkness cannot smother it.

Lord we believe, strengthen our faith when we are timid, and give us humility and tenderness toward those with whom we strive, so that our collective sin of dehumanization may fade away, and our nation may live up to its most ambitious ideals. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/07/white-supremacist-terrorism-intelligence-analyst>