

Coming of Age program — Sample statements of religious identity

Here are 7 statements of religious identity written by past participants in UUCPA's Coming of Age program. As you look at these, think about these hints for writing your statement of religious identity:

- Start with a story, or a strong statement of what you believe. This means— *Don't* start by saying “Hello, I am _____” (they'll know who you are from the order of service). Aarav Billore (no. 2), Sarah Kostka (no. 3), and Francesca Finch (no. 7) all have great opening sentences that immediately grab your attention.
- If you don't know how to start writing, try one of these approaches:
 - Make a list of what you value and believe, as Olivia Ramberg-Gomez (no. 6) does.
 - Focus on a single story that captures what you value or believe in, as Amy Tey (no. 5) does.
 - Focus on a single idea, as Sarah Kostka (no. 3) and Sam LaSalle (no. 4) do.
- Write in a straight-forward, matter-of-fact style. You can use humor, as Celia Frahn (no. 1) does—although effective use of humor can be difficult.
- End with a good strong statement that captures the essence of what you believe. Aarav Billore (no. 2) and Francesca Finch (no. 7) both end with strong statements. This means— *Don't* end by saying “thank you,” or “good bye,” or something like that. Let your strong summary statement end in a silence that allows people to take in what you have said.
- Above all, write what's really true for you. You don't need to *completely* bare your soul, but whatever you say should be true and from your heart.

Note: In the past, we called these statements of religious identity “credos,” and you'll see that term used below. We stopped calling them “credos” because a credo says what you *believe*, but we found that many teens wrote statements about something other than traditional belief.

Also, you'll see some typographical errors and maybe even spelling errors in these statements of religious identity. Typos and spelling don't matter! Since you'll be reading these aloud, no one is going to know if there are typos or spelling errors.

A/ Religion and social justice

1. Celia Frahn, 2019

Celia has a dry sense of humor, and her statement was very funny when she read it aloud. She makes it explicit that her religious identity is social justice work.

I am committed to doing whatever I can to make this world a better place. I know, it's the most basic answer I could have come up with, but it fits. When I started this class, I was annoyed, to say the least. I mean, I had so many important other things to do, like being a couch potato. When we started thinking about writing our credos, I thought mine was going to be about how I don't believe in god, and how credos are stupid. However, as I started to think more deeply about it, I realized that I have to have other priorities than just getting my favorite Philz cup of caffeine. So, with my Philz in one hand and pen in other, I began to write.

Back to my topic sentence of how I want to make the world a better place. I know, I sound like an idealistic children's book about how you should treat others the way you want to be treated. If that's not Unitarian Universalism in its most simple form, I don't know what is. But, it connects to how I have always tried to live my life, and I will fight for anything that needs my help. I want to be able to live in a world where I can thrive, and if I don't fight for change, who will?

For example, an issue that affects my life today is immigration. Even though I live in the Silicon Valley bubble, there is a world outside of it. I mean, I always knew this, but I never understood how deeply I misinterpreted the world. When our president imposed a travel ban two years ago, I thought it was stupid, but I didn't understand how impactful it was. So, as good UU child, I asked questions. My first question was, why? Immigrants are exactly like us, just trying to survive and pursue happiness. But obviously, some people don't exactly get that idea. People who are just trying to live a better life, even some of my family and friends, faced unimaginable violence in their home country. But, when they show up to the U.S. border or an airport, they are prosecuted for seeking asylum, which is one of their only rights as an immigrant.

Why can't the world we live in have at least equal rights for every human being? Adding on to this idea, one thing that I like about this religion or set of beliefs is that the sixth UU principle states that our goal is: "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." This saying has been around for a while, but when said aloud, many people dismiss it as a childish dream, and that "life is not fair." But you know what, I am going to do anything and everything in my power to live up to this principle. I mean, like sometimes i'm probably not always going to have it as my top priority, like if I am studying for exams like i have to later today, I'm not going to go to a march, but I also know my desire to work for equality won't go away.

One thing I have never been good at is making decisions. See, I like Unitarian Universalism because no one tells you what to believe, but I also hate it. Like, sometimes, I just need someone to tell me what to do, because I am very indecisive. So, this credo writing process has not been easy, every sentence I second-guessed myself, but at some-point I realized that I just have to type something, or this service would be a lotttt shorter. But, reflecting back on this

process, writing my values down was somewhat easier than I had envisioned. I know this is cheesy, so get ready... but it came from the heart and just flowed. Like since it was what I have always believed, it came easy. In conclusion, I will fight for my generation and others to be able to live in a world where we won't have to fight for equality. I know that if I fight for change, something will happen.

2. Aarav Billore, 2018

Aarav doesn't touch on traditional religious or philosophical topics in his statement of religious identity. But by the end of it, you have a very clear sense of who he is.

Trayvon Martin was unarmed, but he was brutally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer on February 26, 2012. The volunteer's name was George Zimmerman. He had called the police on multiple occasions to report what he thought as suspicious behavior. Every time he did this, he was reporting a black male. These previous racial biases came up front when he fatally shot Trayvon Martin because of his race. Zimmerman claimed to have shot in self defense, but this argument is refuted by the fact that Martin was unarmed and had seen Zimmerman before, as Martin had commonly visited that neighborhood. Zimmerman even claimed race was not involved, even though his previous calls show that he was blatantly lying. Worst of all, these arguments were taken seriously by the Sanford Police Department and even the Seminole County Circuit Court. It took the court only two days — two days! — to reach a verdict of not guilty. No verdict of guilty, no hung jury, just the false verdict of not guilty, claiming Zimmerman shot Martin in self defense.

I first read about the Trayvon Martin story years after it happened. In fact, I only read about it last year. It was in a book with many stories about discrimination against black people. This story however, touched me the most. This was because it was just a kid who was shot. Trayvon was playing video games with his friend and went to get snacks. He never thought this could turn into the last trip of his life. This is why this story reached to me the most-- because this could happen to me. I reacted to this story thinking how someone could kill a teenager. I was appalled at this standard of racism.

Such events have been happening all too often, showing that racial biases since the 60's have barely changed. Martin Luther King changed the legal aspect of racism, but the mentality of the people has not changed. Empty political promises come to no fruition. The mindset of the people has not been changed much since they threw stones at black people marching on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. We still have Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and , of course, Trayvon Martin. All of these are un-armed people who were killed due to racial profiling by armed personnel. This shows that people are not willing to change their mindset to not be racist. What is even worse is that many people don't even accept that racism is still a problem. One poll from 2014 says that more white people believe in ghosts than believe racism is still a problem in America. It is a problem, as shown by the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally. It showed that racism is a monster to be taken seriously, as evil philosophies such as white supremacy and neo-Nazism, as well as organizations like the KKK still exist.

People need to recognize that a problem as big as racism cannot go away with a few laws or even 60 years. It takes a strengthened education system to do so. In Germany, students are taught extensively about the Holocaust, and analyze why it was done and how to stop similar actions today. In America, on the other hand, we are only taught the events of racism, and Jim Crow, and slavery. There is no emotional aspect of it. We are just told, in the words of Trevor Noah, “There was slavery and then there was Jim Crow and then there was Martin Luther King, Jr. and now it’s done.” This does not lead to a preventive mindset. People are just told that racism no longer exists, so they do not recognize it as a problem even when it is blatant. What the story of Trayvon Martin should teach us is that racism is still very much alive. No matter what income (Zimmerman worked a professional job as an insurance investigator), people do not abandon the racism that has defined America since the start. People’s mindset needs to change from early childhood so that people can combat racism from the very core.

Racism divides; this is exactly what we shouldn’t do in already divisive times like this. We should be united, as in unity comes strength. Racism prevents true unity, so it must be eradicated, but people should still remember that it happened and know why it happened. This is how racism is truly stopped. We should make sure that there are no more Trayvon Martins in the future by ending racism with a firm hand.

B/ UU views on religious beliefs

3. Sarah Kostka, 2018

Sarah talks about her very unconventional understanding of God—she “created her own God.” Her statement of religious identity may seem short, but she read slowly (as you’re supposed to) so it lasted longer than you’d think.

One day, on the playground in third grade, I was on the swings. Out of the blue, I looked up at the sky and thought to myself, “I believe in God.” Cute, huh? I didn’t really know what I was thinking, but believing in God seemed like a good idea. I just wanted to be nice to whoever was behind those clouds by reminding him or her, “I believe in you!” To this day, to some extent, I do believe in God.

In later elementary school, I was at church for a Passover dinner and I was coloring in pictures of the ten plagues. Stories say that they were sent to Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to free the Jews from slavery there. As I colored the first plague that turned all the water into blood, the bright red crayon I was using made the situation seem graphic. I thought to myself, “This is pretty scary and extreme. I don’t want to believe in this horror. If I believe in God, do I have to like the evil that s/he can do? Do I have to believe that s/he can do evil at all?” God’s influence should be mental positivity and love, not physical evil. In this case, the water should have stayed water, like nature intended, and not been turned to blood. God should have found another way to end Jewish slavery, perhaps by spreading love.

So, I created my own God, which I will take with me everywhere. If there's injustice, my God will encourage me to stop it, and I will keep my God in mind when I or others need help. I thought a lot more this time, finding loopholes in how much I liked the traditional idea of God and sculpting my own.

Fast-forward to middle school. I meet a lot more people with different religious beliefs. I overhear my Mormon friend talking to my friend who is both atheist and Jewish. My Mormon friend asks, "What do you believe?" and my other friend responds, "Well, I don't believe in God." My Mormon friend is confused. She says, "How can you not believe in God when you are Jewish? He's like the center of everything." After a while they agree to disagree, which gets me thinking: Believing in God works for my Mormon friend, and not believing in God also works for my atheist-Jewish friend. So there's no problem with that.

All in all, I do believe in God, my God. And I respect others who do and don't believe in God or gods. Everyone across the planet believes in different things, and that should be cherished, not destroyed.

4. Sam LaSalle, 2016

Sam starts with a story, then gets into his unconventional take on standard religious beliefs.

I have never liked talking about my thoughts, I never have.

When I was young—well, younger—I would think up these incredible adventures, in space, in a kingdom, and imagine my favorite video game characters clashing worlds with Harry Potter. I called this "imagination time," and I hated when it was interrupted. So when my mom would come to talk to me I would shoo her away and say "I'm having imagination time," and she would leave me alone. For a kid, a power this great was like magic. And I have since developed a desire not to speak about my deep thoughts.

So naturally, writing a statement of religious identity did not exactly appeal to me. My mom would try to get me to think in the car ride home from church, and it usually ended in an argument over something. This really annoyed me, because I had thought about what I believed in and found that I believed that I really could care less about if God existed, or if there was an afterlife, or reincarnation or finding true happiness. I couldn't think about those things, because I had some math homework that was due tomorrow and it was already 8 o'clock at night.

I was fine with this approach, until I heard this one life-changing phrase:

"Why do people think science and god/religion have to be mutually exclusive? If anything, science makes god look pretty darn cool."

This phrase totally upended my philosophy about life in general, that science was the true way to read the universe.

I started thinking, perhaps god isn't some moody old white guy whose standards no human being could ever meet, maybe god is some incredibly smart entity that created the complex world of physics, and chemistry, and that life just happened to create itself in the world this "god" created.

I like this way of thinking because it follows the popular scientific idea that life on earth was a chemical accident, and this would explain why physics and chemistry exist in the forms they do.

So I guess I do care about belief, just a little bit, enough to actually write a credo, from the perspective of a “scientitheist.”

C/ Telling a story

5. Amy Tey, 2016

A classic example of using a personal story to start off a statement of religious identity.

My grandfather wasn't scared to talk about his death, and that was something I always admired about him. There was something peaceful about the way he viewed death; he was systematic and matter-of-fact, a thinker and a planner. Despite being perhaps the exact opposite of the stereotypical grandparent, he cared for his family in the greatest ways he knew; he planned for us to have a beautiful future, and for him to pass away in his own home. When that couldn't happen, he was stubbornly averse to the change, and his move to California, a year prior to his death, was chaotic and stressful—something he hadn't planned for. In contrast, death was something he had planned, for ten, twenty years before. He knew exactly what he wanted. The ultimate gift he gave us was his stubbornly efficient planning; in detailing his wishes, my grandpa aimed to make my mother's life easier. He never wanted her to worry about him. From my grandfather, I learned that caring and loving come in different ways, never simple, but always there.

My grandfather was brave enough to look death in the eye and face his own mortality. So as I watched his serene struggle on the hospital bed, monitors beeping, his labored, rhythmic breathing echoing my heartbeat, I listened, and I wondered. Every time there was a pause, I held my breath—what would happen when those breaths stopped? When he took his last thin breath, when the lines on all the screens went flat? I still don't know, and I'm really very okay with that—but I do have an idea.

Like my grandfather thought, you have your life, and when your eyes flutter to a close for the final time, it's a sweet, timely ending. My grandfather's timely ending was peaceful, surrounded by family, his hand on his little dog Buddy. I want to be as brave as my grandfather was with death, and have my own sweet ending. I don't believe in happy, fairy-tale endings, per se—I just believe in your personal ending. When my time comes, I want to have been more intentional with my life. I want to be kinder and apply myself more. I want to say “I love you” and have more empathy, and make a difference—big or small—in this world. Death is timely, and maybe it's not always fair, but it is what it is. And for what it is, I hope everyone has their sweet ending, one worthy of their days, and their presence, on this earth.

D/ Statement of religious identity as a list

6. Olivia Ramberg-Gomez, 2016

In this statement of religious identity, Olivia goes down the list of what she believes.

When I first started coming here, it was because I went to Thacher Preschool, right over there, and all I did was play outside, eat snacks, and take naps, and it was great. I didn't really know why I was there, I just came. But as I moved from the Red class to the Orange class to the Yellow class and so on— wait, never mind, there isn't an Orange class—we started learning more about religion. Now don't get me wrong, learning about religion was kinda cool, I just wasn't as interested in coming to church that much anymore. And when it came to learning about many different religions and visiting other churches, I wanted to be interested but I just wasn't. But just because I am not that interested in learning about religion, doesn't mean I don't have beliefs of my own.

I believe that life is valuable. Sometimes we don't realize how special it is and how lucky we are to be here now, able to do all these cool things that are right at the tip of our fingers. We shouldn't take advantage of the resources we have and the things we have because there are so many people on our planet who don't have those things. Sometimes in our society, we don't think about what other people in other parts of the world are going through, but I believe that we should take a moment at least everyday and realize how lucky we are.

I believe we need to take care of our planet. Sometimes we take what mother earth gives us for granted because we don't stop and think about the effects our actions have on her. I know I am guilty of doing this at times. Right now climate change, global warming and sea level rise are only some of the big problems that need to be fixed, but not everyone is doing something about it. But now it is our turn to help the earth because she has given us so much, and all we have done is destroy it. It is time for us to stop these problems.

I believe that everything has a life after death, but that new life all depends what you did in your past life. If you were a kind, helpful person, you will get rewarded by becoming something that gets taken care of and is loved by others. But if you were someone that was unkind, that didn't take responsibility for their actions, that didn't care about others, you would become something that people don't like, that they didn't care about.

I hope to make a difference in this world by doing good things, by taking responsibility for my actions, by not taking my life for granted. I believe that if I and others keep these things in mind, the world will slowly start to become a better place.

E/ Other

7. Francesca Finch, 2018

Instead of focusing exclusively on her religious identity, Francesca chose to give something that's more like a miniature sermon.

¡Vivir Es Increible!

This was something I saw on a sign, in Mexico. It was a large sign, and, unlike a board with words on it, this was one that was just words on a hill. It wasn't an advertisement. If you're wondering what it means, it means "life is incredible".

Life is incredible. Life is amazing.

Many people often forget that. They'll commit to hatred of one group of people, or have beliefs that limit them and their beliefs. If you have beliefs that limit you, take a moment. Think about why you have those beliefs. Are they preventing you from understanding people? Are you being closed-minded? Nothing big has to happen for you to change your beliefs. You don't have to go through some kind of traumatic, life changing experience. Beliefs aren't set in stone.

I mean, some beliefs are, but many are just slowly developed over time in the subconscious. So take a moment, and I'll give you one in a sec, to think about what you believe. Think about it now.

[moment of silence]

Now that you've had your moment, I'd like you to think about how your beliefs match up with who you'd like to be.

Who do you want people to see you as? Who is your best self? Because, as I'm sure you know, we present ourselves differently to different people. I might be more myself with my friends, and less when talking to waiters. This doesn't mean I'm not authentic. It means I have different comfort levels around different people. People are like onions. The closer you are to their core, the more of them you see. Some people only get to see the outer layers. And that's okay.

And think about where you want to go. What's your end goal? Yes, we do need to live in the moment. We should appreciate what's around us, reveling in the beauty of fleeting moments. And yes, we also need to have a kind of "ideal" in which you may not have done everything right, but you're content.

Content. Even the word itself is...nice. It feels like peace. It feels like the future, if we don't mess it up first. Which we may as well might, the way politics, global warming, and human rights are going. But again, we can make change.

In fifth grade I participated in an Honor Society program. My group focused on recycling, and the most profound thing I took from that extra part of school is the idea of a circle of influence. Your circle of influence is whomever you can impart your thoughts and beliefs on. Your friends, family, teachers, coworkers, and even the stranger you unintentionally changed the life of with a single interaction, they are all part of your circle of influence.

So use your life. Use your circle of influence. Go out there. Make new beliefs. Respect the beliefs of others, be content, be you.

And then change the world.