

UUA PRINCIPLES IV & Our Religious LIVING TRADITION

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Sometimes outsiders think that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything. Certainly there are a wide array of acceptable beliefs within our tradition, but our 7 Principles and 6 Sources do put some limits on which beliefs are acceptable and which are not within this movement and our congregations. Sometimes UU members are not even aware of our historical influences and do not appreciate the religious and philosophical traditions which have shaped Unitarian Universalism.

In the previous sermons in this series about our Unitarian Universalist Principles, I addressed the way our Principles express important values of Compassion, Justice, and Community. This morning, I am focusing on the Religious traditions that have and do influence Unitarian Universalism.

Though we include many people who identify as Christians, we are not a Christian denomination. We did however grow out of the liberal edges of Christianity, with both the Unitarians and Universalists identifying as Christian groups through the 19th century and into the 20th Century. Not all Christians have accepted Unitarians and Universalists as Christians, in fact as early as 325 A.D. the Council of Nicaea, which first declared Trinitarian understandings of Jesus to be authoritative, declared the proto-Unitarians to be heretics. The Universalists, who proclaimed universal salvation by a

loving God, were labeled heretics a couple centuries later. The root of the word heresy means to choose, and the Unitarians and Universalists have chosen different paths throughout the Christian period.

In the religious explorations carried on by Unitarians and Universalists, especially during the 19th and 20th Centuries, Eastern religious traditions and more recently pagan and other earth-centered traditions began to draw interest by our religious forebears. Unitarians and Universalists helped to bring those Eastern traditions into the awareness of other Americans during the Parliament of Religions at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

When our statement of Living Tradition was formulated as a companion to the 7 Principles and passed by General Assemblies in 1984 and 1985, Jewish and Christian Teachings were relegated to 4th place among our historical sources. The Earth-Centered traditions were added later, in 1995, but otherwise the statement has stood essentially unchanged for 30 years. An attempt to bring changes suggested by a UUA Commission on Appraisal Report in 2009 failed, in part due to the requirement that they be accepted without amendment. Periodic reviews of the UUA bylaws will someday likely result in significant changes to the Principles and Traditions, but together they comprise the most significant statement of UU beliefs that is possible for a non-creedal, non-doctrinal tradition.

Our 4th source or tradition: *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves*; describes our oldest history as a movement, reflecting the origins of both Unitarian and Universalist ideas in the monotheistic movements of Judaism and Christianity. 19th Century Unitarian views were in many ways more like Judaic views with Jesus added as a prophetic figure. Universalism did not coalesce as a singular belief until the late 18th Century, with many of its early proponents holding a Trinitarian view of Jesus.

Hosea Ballou's writings in the early 19th Century brought most Universalists to see Jesus as did the Unitarians. Universalism has often been thought of as more a religion of the heart, emphasizing the love of

God. As Methodists and others also came to emphasize the love of God, the distinctive views of the Universalists became less effective in drawing adherents. Most Universalists did not believe in hell, though some believed in a kind of purgatory for purifying souls. Today, some UUs believe in heaven and an afterlife, while many do not.

The Unitarian Humanism of the 20th Century tended to de-emphasize discussion of Jesus or God, but the movement has always had those who look to Jesus or his teachings as important if not authoritative. I will be addressing Humanism and Philosophical influences in my next sermon.

Our third source or tradition, *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life*; claims the influence of all world religions, though clearly Christianity and Buddhism have had an edge over the last century in religious influence. Hinduism and Islam have had a significantly lesser influence, but they too have had some impact. Pagan and Earth-Centered religions were not mentioned until they came to have their own source statement in 1995, though their influence has been growing in Unitarian Universalism over the last several decades.

As global trade was increasing in the 18th and 19th Centuries, copies of Eastern Religious writings began to be available and to be translated into English. Emerson and other Unitarian transcendentalists began to be interested in Eastern Religions by the mid-19th Centuries. The teachings and meditative practices of Buddhism have continued to grow in influence on UUs since at least the mid-20th century.

As had become clear to many UUs by the time that revisions to the Principles and Traditions were proposed, the current listing of sources is inadequate in describing all the religious and philosophical influences upon Unitarian Universalism. Nonetheless, the changes then proposed were too drastic and did not sufficiently reflect desired changes.

Our first source in the statement of Living Tradition is, *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life*. This source statement describes a more spiritual understanding of transcendent

religious influences on individuals. It is more experiential and follows a more transcendental understanding of religious experience, describing the sense of wonder or awe which probably inspires most religious seekers. These are the mountain top universal Peak Experiences of Abraham Maslow. This source also reflects the sense of mystery that has inspired so many UUs and others over countless millennia of human history. These are the spiritual experiences which drive one to explore religions and seek religious wisdom, the life changing experiences which inspire religious seekers to come to new understandings of themselves and the cosmos.

The last and newest source, *Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature*, is similar to the first but uses somewhat differing language to describe spirituality within earth-centered traditions as a reflection of the cycles of the natural world. Earth-centered traditions have enriched and challenged most UU congregations over at least the last 25 years.

These religious source statements attempt to describe the primary spiritual and religious influences that have shaped Unitarian Universalism. They are certainly not exhaustive, but are at least suggestive of the traditions that have formed individual UUs and influenced congregations and other segments of Unitarian Universalism.

Many individual factors influence our personal religious quests. Through the period after the Vietnam War, many young adults became dissatisfied with the Christian Religious choices and began to explore Eastern and other religious traditions. For years, newcomers to Unitarian Universalism would often describe their religious journeys from lukewarm involvement in some birthrite Christian denomination, through mind-opening experiences at Universities, sometimes with hallucinogenics and sometimes with World Religion Classes, into some kind of involvement in Buddhist study groups, and then into a quest for a more inclusive religion such as Unitarian Universalism.

Today, those who come into Unitarian Universalism often had no early religious instruction or involvement and were less likely to have tried hallucinogenics but are still motivated to find an accepting religious

community. The growth of families, with children who are asked about their religion on the playground by Christian peers, often inspires families to seek out congregations who will educate but not indoctrinate their children.

Unitarians have never had a history of proselytizing. They have always depended on newcomers finding their own way to Unitarianism.

Universalists probably made somewhat more effort to invite persons to come in, but modern Unitarian Universalism has not often worked very hard to invite newcomers. We have made more effort in recent years to at least try to make newcomers feel welcome when they do find us, but we are not particularly evangelistic in our outreach efforts. We have tended, more like the Unitarians of old, to let people find us when they have exhausted their search of other religious traditions. Not to say that we are a last choice religiously, but where would people go if they cannot find a religious home with us? Some, I am told, decide to stay home and read the New York Times.

Now, if we have been influenced by these traditions mentioned, and individuals influenced by even more, what is it that we have gained from these traditions? In regard to Christianity, as well as many other traditions, it is clear that we gained from them our core values. The values behind the Principles are the core values of every major human religion. As in the Humanist Manifesto, so in our UUA Principles, mention of deities has been removed, whether to protect the innocent or guilty, I'm not sure! When UUs talk about Jesus, it is mostly in regard to his teachings, or rather what we think he taught. Few of us believe that God dictated the Bible, and many of us believe that early Christians heavily edited the Jesus tradition to create what became Christianity.

Though there are Christian meditative practices, UUism has probably been more influenced by Buddhist and Hindu Yoga practices and other meditative practices than by Christian meditation. Our form of worship in most congregations, however, is little modified from mainstream protestant Christianity, except by the decrease or elimination of prayers and references to Jesus and God.

Also, though many of us appreciate St. Francis' care for the animals and natural world, earth-centered religions as well as modern science, have really pushed us to be more aware of the earth and her creatures. We are influenced far more by concerns of stewardship than by opportunities for dominion in regard to the natural world today, and we may try to reinvigorate the ecological UU Green Sanctuary program in this congregation some day soon.

Our caring for, tolerance of, and acceptance of people as a congregation and a movement is also based in our understanding of the teachings of Jesus, who did not condemn others and invited children to come and reputedly fed and taught the multitudes. We also gained a sense of fairness and righteousness, justice and compassion, from Judaism and other traditions. Teachings about right relationships and the golden rule come from many traditions that have influenced Unitarian Universalism.

Our encouragement of individual spiritual quests also comes out of the many traditions that have influenced UUism, including Christianity. Our individual journeys are encouraged, valued, and respected, so long as our practices do not harm others.

Our Statement of Living Tradition may be imperfect, but it attempts to declare the many influences that have shaped UUism. It is a foundational document for modern UUism, and it is a great reminder to us all to keep our hearts and minds open for wisdom from many sources! The last sermon in this series will address humanism and other philosophical influences on UUism. Please read through the Principles and Statement of Living Tradition a few times this week! Peace, Out!