

UUA PRINCIPLES V & Our PHILOSOPHICAL 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.

According to preeminent 20th Century Unitarian and UU Theologian James Luther Adams, there are five smooth stones of religious liberalism:

- "Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous." Our religious tradition is a living tradition because we are always learning new truths.
- "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion." We freely choose to enter into relationship with one another.
- "Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. It is this which makes the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism." Justice.
- "... [W]e deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." Agency: Good things don't just happen, people make them happen.
- "[L]iberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." Hope.

Adams, who came from a fundamentalist family, progressed through scientific humanism during his studies, and ended up characterizing himself as a religious liberal after reflections during and following studies in Nazi Germany shortly before the Second World War, also exemplifies the values of religious humanism.

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; and in last week's sermon I reflected upon the religious sources within our Living Tradition. This morning, I am focusing on the Philosophical sources and traditions that have and do influence Unitarian Universalism.

On my own journey, I have traveled far from the challenges of my confirmation as a Methodist youth to explore the Bible, Christianity, and Religion generally. I wrote my own major in Religious Studies at Northern Illinois University, then entered Seminary seeking answers to metaphysical questions even while realizing that my gifts of listening to and caring for others were calling me toward ministry. Answering the ordination questions to be a United Methodist Minister was as difficult as answering some of the Confirmation Questions which in many ways prompted my explorations in college and seminary. It was far easier for me to answer the questions to be a Unitarian Universalist Minister some years later, for they did not include allegiance to Jesus as a Savior nor even a belief in God. My own journey, which admittedly grew out of a scientific interest that went even beyond what the sciences could answer into the great metaphysical mysteries of the cosmos had led me toward a humanistic agnosticism which takes great comfort in the two sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith that I am addressing this morning.

Our 2nd Source: 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.

This source which seems at first a bit innocuous, actually affirms the power behind the religious revelations otherwise mentioned in addition to affirming the value of moral and ethical philosophies which are not specifically religious in nature. Even if the religions of this world may be inspired by unseen gods and goddesses, they were delivered in the words of prophetic women and men. Similarly, the philosophical wisdom of humanity has always been delivered in the words of Prophetic Men and Women. Religious and Philosophical exemplars, teachers, and heroes have spoken in many

languages and in many eras, but they have all been members of the human race, at least as far as is currently provable! The wisdom from such people has provided profound insights for transformative living and loving as well as for the practice of justice with compassion. These teachings are at the core of humanity itself, expressed in both humanistic philosophies and in religions of the world. The great deeds accomplished by women and men throughout history on the basis of these ethical teachings have changed and shaped the world across time and continue to reshape the world of today.

Our 5th Source: 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.

Our 5th source particularly highlights the wisdom obtained through scientific inquiry and the empirical method while warning against closed minded adherence to any doctrine or dogma which would block our ability to hear, understand, and respond to new discoveries and revelations. Though we know magnitudes more about ourselves, the world, and the cosmos than when many of us were born, there are new things discovered each year.

Unitarian Universalists have long described our religion as one based upon reason, rather than upon miracle and magic. For most of us, our religion must make sense, for we are a skeptical bunch who are not easily satisfied by those who would tell us to take anything on faith. We have faith in a reasonable community of persons who freely gather to explore the meaning of life, who encourage and support each other in our individual journeys. Many of us trust more in science than in any teaching of religion, but we gather as a reasonable religion.

John H. Dietrich, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis from 1916-38 was one of the foremost leaders and exponents of Unitarian religious humanism in the first half of the 20th Century. He and 33 others, mostly Unitarians, signed the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933. I want to share with you a quote from Dietrich and a statement from the American Humanist Association from the website of First Unitarian Minneapolis:

(Humanism on Website of 1st Unitarian Society, Minneapolis as of 8/2014)

In his sermon “Unitarianism and Humanism,” John H. Dietrich, the senior minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis from 1916 to 1938, described humanism this way:

By religion, I mean the knowledge of and duties toward humankind. That is humanism. It does not deny the right to believe in God and learn what you can about that which we designate as God, but it places faith in humanity, a knowledge of humankind and our duties toward one another first. . . .

It makes the prime task of religion not the contemplation of the eternal, the worship of the most high, the withdrawal from this world that one might commune better with God; but rather the contemplation of the conditions of human life, the reverence for the worth of human life, and the entering into the world that by human effort human life may be improved.

From the American Humanist Association

Humanism is a way of living, thinking, and acting that allows every individual to actualize his or her highest aspirations and successfully achieve a happy and fulfilling life. Humanists take responsibility for their own morals and their own lives, and for the lives of their communities and the world in which we live. Humanists emphasize reason and scientific inquiry, individual freedom and responsibility, human values and compassion, and the need for tolerance and cooperation. Humanists reject supernatural, authoritarian, and anti-democratic beliefs and doctrines.

Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values—be they religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human experience and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

Dietrich and other Unitarian Humanists shaped the Unitarian and Unitarian Universalism of most of the 20th Century, but both religious and secular humanists have seen their influence decline with a resurgence of Christianity and the growth of other religions in the United States in recent decades.

It is currently unclear who will win the latest skirmishes in the culture wars, but the fastest growing numbers in recent religious polls are of the unchurched. It would seem that the unchurched would provide great potential for Unitarian Universalist growth, but our movement seems to be becoming more theistic and more spiritual, thus less compatible with the unchurched and more similar to the remaining examples of liberal Christianity. Since most of our ministers are trained in Christian seminaries and all are expected to be familiar with Christian sacred writings and beliefs, it should be no surprise that we are influenced by Christianity, but I wonder whether this movement toward Christianity will leave us less inclusive and less attractive to those who have no interest in Christianity.

That unique message of the Universalists of salvation for all by a loving god, actually led to the decline of Universalism as Methodists and others began to preach love. Will we go so far as to define ourselves as liberal Christians and would that lead to decline in favor of the groups who have a longer history of liberal Christianity and better funding? One of the ongoing questions in our movement is who are we really and can we be as inclusive as we advertise?

How have all these religious and philosophical sources influenced Unitarian Universalism, and where are we going as a movement? Our roots are in the liberal fringes of Christianity, but where are our wings? With our desire for justice with compassion and our commitment to a free religious community bound by a shared morality within religious and philosophical diversity, we have been influenced by many sources but our future is unknown.

In the 20th Century we attracted scientists and engineers, doctors and nurses, social workers and teachers, artists and musicians, and a wide array of other freethinkers. We were a haven for Cultural Creatives, Religious Humanists, and sometimes Pagans, and generally a home for the religiously disenfranchised. Who will join us in the 21st Century and will we survive the revival of fundamentalist Christianity and Islam? Do we have a mission or even a vision of our challenge in this new age? We can be many things, we have been inclusive with few demands or obligations placed upon members, but do we have something unique to offer for the 21st Century?

In these sermons on the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Living Tradition, I have attempted to provide an introduction to our movement for newcomers as well as a reminder to current members of who we are and from whence we came. My challenge for all of us now is to explore the religious, spiritual, and philosophical needs of those who might join us and try to discover what we might be able to offer to those who will come to our doors in coming weeks, months, and years. We found a community that met our needs when we arrived, what can we offer to those who will come tomorrow? Our acceptance of many beliefs and our encouragement of many journeys may still be unique, but will it be enough and will we be able to sustain it?

For those who are new to Unitarian Universalism, I hope this series has helped you to understand who we are or at least where we have been. For all of us, I hope that we can be inspired by our Principles and Living Tradition to continue building a religion for the present and the future!

So May it Be!

Amen!