

UU PRINCIPLES, PURPOSE, and TRADITION Part II

Acceptance

Last week I spoke in more general terms about the UU Principles, but today I want to focus on one of the most important concepts within the Principles and our statement of Living Tradition. Historically Unitarians talked about tolerance and tolerance was one of the guiding principles for Unitarians long before the current set of principles was passed by General Assembly. Even back in the time of Servetus who has been called the first modern Unitarian, in the first half of the 16th Century, a key idea of Unitarianism was tolerance of a range of beliefs. Influenced by Georgio Biandrata and Francis David, Transylvania's Unitarian King John Sigismund decreed religious toleration in 1557 and 1563. As Unitarian movements developed in Europe, England, and the United States in the 18th and 19th Centuries, toleration of religious viewpoints remained a key aspect of Unitarian faith. When William Ellery Channing defined American Unitarian Christianity with his sermon of that name in 1819, it was only the invitation that 20 years later led to Ralph Waldo Emerson's criticism of Unitarian and other Clergy as he developed his Transcendentalist ideas. Theodore Parker soon added questions of an even stronger emphasis on social justice into the mix of Unitarian ideas. Emerson and others began studies of Eastern religions long before Unitarians and Universalists joined in the World Parliament of Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893.

Even though both American Unitarianism and Universalism most directly grew out of New England Congregational Christianity, key ideas of both go back at least to the early days of Christianity. The Unitarians did not see Jesus as divine, a son of God more like a prophet, and the Universalists did not believe that a loving God would consign anyone to eternal damnation. By the end of the first World War, both Unitarians and Universalists were questioning ideas about God.

Throughout most of the 20th Century, Unitarianism was dominated by Humanists who did not find any divinity necessary for living a moral life. Some were Deists, some Agnostics, some Atheists. The Humanist manifesto of 1933, laying out moral principles without reference to God, long vilified by evangelical Christians, was written and signed by Unitarian Ministers and one Universalist.

Later on in the 20th Century, UUism began to be influenced more by Buddhism and other Eastern traditions as Yoga, Meditation, Centering, and Mindfulness helped to meet the needs of modern people in turbulent times in the 1960s and beyond. This greater openness probably also helped to bring acceptance for Pagans and a growing interest in Spirituality that became apparent beginning in the 1980s.

Even though Unitarian Universalism has always been at least theoretically open to persons of color, the departure of a large number of black members in 1970 due to some unfulfilled promises by the association eventually led to the Journey Toward Wholeness programs passed by General Assembly in 1996. These programs, while well-intentioned did not always find unanimous support due to some tactics used and the expectation that all white UUs needed to confess to being racists. Later programs focusing on complex issues of white privilege have been somewhat better accepted. Overall the heightened awareness of racial issues within Unitarian Universalism has probably been positive though it has not yet resulted in a significant increase in members of color. The location, amount of music by old dead white guys used, humanistic tendencies and the worship styles of most UU congregations have been mentioned as some reasons why UU congregations are not more attractive to persons of color. The most effective contacts with persons of color are often in social justice efforts and very recently particularly in support given to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Unitarian Universalism has done somewhat better in accepting and including LGBTQ persons, particularly by being the first religious

tradition to sanctify same-sex marriages and ordain LGBTQ ministers. A majority of UU Congregations have completed the Welcoming Congregation program aimed at acceptance of LGBTQ persons, which has been available for decades. Most UU congregations include several LGBTQ members and friends.

Another major level of acceptance comes in the area of religious beliefs. In general, all persons of good will are welcome in UU Congregations so long as their practices do not result in harm to others or to themselves. The acceptance of various beliefs is included in our principles recognizing the worth and dignity of every person, calling for justice, equity, and compassion, and encouraging acceptance of all persons. The acceptance of various beliefs is further elaborated in our statement of Living Tradition or Sources which also appears in Article II.C.2.1 of the UUA bylaws and states that:

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.

One of the struggles we have here and in many other UU congregations is getting the word out about the acceptance that we practice. This is probably our single most powerful recruiting tool, and yet we just don't do very well at spreading the word. In fact, there has been a long-standing bias against recruiting which stems from the negative responses many Unitarians felt in regard to Christian evangelism in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The habit of most Unitarian congregations was to not engage in recruiting, but to almost grudgingly welcome those persons who found their way to the door. In the 20th Century as new congregations bought cheap property at the edge of town or in other out-of-the way locations and constructed or used buildings looking nothing like traditional churches, it was not always easy to even find the Unitarian church. Recent UU graduates of seminary are more open to recruiting, especially using social media, blogs, and informative websites. The most effective way to recruit new persons is for friends to invite like-minded individuals.

At the end of the sermon today I am going to open the floor for comments again, and I want to invite you to comment on one idea that the Program Council will be considering later today. It has been suggested that we put out signs letting people know what we believe. As one expression of that, how would you feel about us putting a banner out on the new fence saying Black Lives Matter and Stop the Violence? You can share your thoughts in a few minutes.

Now there are lots of ways we let people know that we accept them once they come in our doors. We are welcoming to everyone, as many newcomers have told us. Newcomers usually have someone from the membership committee help them find their way on Sunday morning, and most often people in coffee hour will speak with newcomers to welcome them and help them feel at home. And of course, not everyone is looking for what we have to offer. If someone comes in carrying a Bible, you can be pretty sure they are looking for a more conservative Christian church, but we can still welcome them and invite them for coffee! We do have members who identify as progressive Christians.

As a more humanistic congregation, we probably are least welcoming to conservative Christians, but if we really try to be accepting and welcoming, then it will be up to them to decide we might not be the best fit on theological grounds.

I have mentioned radical hospitality before with the idea that we ought to really go out of our way to welcome people to our congregation. I think we generally do a pretty good job, though we sometimes forget that welcoming is something we all can and should do. Among other things, that means that we should avoid scheduling meetings immediately after the service and wait at least until most new people have left coffee hour! And yes, I know that more people are willing to stay for a meeting shortly after church gets done! It is a matter of where we put our priorities, our values, our principles!

As this election season seems to be creating deeper divisions between parties and increased levels of sexism, heterosexism, and racism, what are we willing to do to make our community more loving and accepting? Too often, I believe, we all are comfortable in our own religious and cultural communities without doing much to make the broader community better. Our principles and sources challenge us to do more, but that cannot be just putting up signs or banners, we must back it up with action. PACT and the new Faith in the Valley organizing efforts of all the PICO groups in the Valley are addressing issues such as homelessness, violence, and the environment. Some of us have gotten very involved in those programs, but will they engage the majority of our members? Will we really own those programs? Is there more that we can do to be inclusive, accepting, and to make our broader community healthier and more just? These are questions that follow from our Principles, ones we have not always done enough to answer!

Even if we welcome persons of color and LGBTQ persons, have we really done enough, have we done all that we can to make our society more just, more equitable, more compassionate? Too often it is said that people can believe anything and be a UU, but to really honor and engage

with our UU Principles, it takes a commitment to justice and a radical acceptance of individuals that may demand more than many other religious traditions. I lay before you today the challenge of acceptance and inclusiveness! How shall we proceed as a congregation?

The sermon in a UU congregation is never the final word but always an invitation to continued conversation! The mic is open for your comments!

Thank You and Amen!

Unitarian Universalist Association Principles and Purposes

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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;
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- 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.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.