

UU PRINCIPLES, PURPOSE, and TRADITION Part III
UU Beliefs and the Sources of our Living Tradition

In part one of this series I talked about our seven UU Principles and then last week I focused on acceptance as a UU Value in the Principles and Sources of our Living Tradition. Today I want to talk about the ways different beliefs have shaped Unitarian Universalism and the ways that they are currently influencing the spiritual and life journeys of Unitarian Universalists. Both Unitarianism and Universalism in America grew out of New England Congregationalism, but the core ideas for each theologially came from the earliest days of Christianity. Proto-Unitarianism may have actually dominated early Christianity with its growth out of Judaism, and the understanding of Jesus' role was not then coequal with God, but secondary to God as a Son or Prophet. Trinitarian understandings which raised Jesus as the Christ to equality with God only became dominant after the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. The Universalist idea of a loving God who would not condemn anyone to eternal damnation has been shared by many theologians from the earliest days of Christianity but found its fullest voice in American Universalism beginning in the mid to late 18th Century. These core Unitarian and Universalist ideas were voted heretical in the 4th and 6th Centuries, but heresy at its root suggests the choosing of alternate beliefs. American Unitarians and Universalists certainly chose alternate paths from the dominant Trinitarian Christian denominations!

As I mentioned last week, our UU movement today continues a history of growth and transformation in beliefs that has been influenced by many religious streams, including our Judeo-Christian roots, various strands of Humanism, Buddhism, Paganism, and other philosophical and theological clusters of belief. The variety and range of sources influencing Unitarian Universalist beliefs becomes particularly important in a religious movement that shares no creed nor doctrine.

Some people looking at Unitarian Universalism do not understand it as a single unique religion because there is no shared creed of beliefs in God. But Unitarian Universalism is not just another Christian Denomination, for too many of us choose to not identify ourselves with current understandings of Christianity even if we value the teachings of Jesus. And while the UU Principles elaborate the values which influence our lives, the Sources of our Living Tradition explain how and why we are not just a Christian or even Post-Christian Religion. The study of Eastern and World Religions which developed in the 19th Century among Unitarians and Universalists helped seekers to find core similarities in value and belief across most religions. Today some focus on teachings of Love in the many traditions as evidence of the common core within most if not all belief systems. There are also commonalities in teachings of respect for self and others, treatment of neighbors, friends, family and even enemies, and various other matters in life.

One of the most important messages in our Sources is the idea that wisdom and knowledge comes from many places and that we ought to remain open to learning from each of these sources. In the Christian tradition, there is the story of an aspirant asking Jesus what he must do or believe in order to be saved. In Unitarian Universalism, the better question is what may we believe and still fit within the range of beliefs acceptable to Unitarian Universalists. In many ways it is even more helpful to look at what we practice, for any person with good will toward others and self-respect will likely be welcomed. We strive to be a religion of welcome and inclusion, but if a person will not respect or is violent toward others or abuses animals or deliberately pollutes or rapaciously uses the environment, or practices criminal activities that harm persons they would not be acceptable members.

The real challenge for Unitarian Universalists is not so much what the minimally acceptable beliefs or practices are to be a UU, but rather how we each may grow in practicing our UU Principles in all we do. There will always be more that we can do to make the world and our communities better, there is always something more that we may do!

Methodists used to talk about going on to perfection, but UUs are always on the path to deeper and wider understandings and healthier more just and compassionate practices. ‘Onward and upward, progress forever’ was a 20th Century motto for Unitarian Universalism, but until we make the jump to hyperspace in the universe, our success may be constrained by the limitations posed by over-exploitation of the natural world, over-population, pollution, decimation of rainforests, and the periodic fluctuations of the new world economy. The hope for a better world is a clear value in our Unitarian Universalist Principles but the path to it is far less clear.

Even so, the freedom of belief within a broad spectrum is one of the most important features of Unitarian Universalism. The talk of freedom and liberality with the absence of any creedal requirement has long drawn people to our movement, including some who do not at least initially understand the high expectations for just, respectful, accepting, loving behavior that lie within our UU Principles. Frankly, by our talk of freedom and liberality we have drawn quite a few individuals who have taken advantage of those ideas without practicing respect or acceptance toward other members and friends. There has been quite a bit of room for manipulation and abuse by those who are not inspired by good will toward others, for it takes a lot for a congregation to exclude anyone. Many congregations still lack a mechanism for restraining behavior or excluding persons not living in accord with UU expectations, values, and Principles. Fortunately such problems remain relatively rare in occurrence though most congregations seem to face them periodically. But there are limits and boundaries beyond which a person may no longer be considered a good Unitarian Universalist, as outlined in the Principles.

With that said, I want to return to the more positive aspects of the freedom we practice within Unitarian Universalism. Because of the wide range of acceptable beliefs, we remain a tradition of perpetual seekers. There is always more that we can learn about humanity and the world and the Gods and Goddesses honored by the religions of the world.

Since we offer even our children the opportunity to sample the religions and philosophies of the world, as well as encouraging the exploration of our adult members, we frequently lose some members to other traditions. This is not a bad thing, for we should not try to hold those who have discovered their truth in another place. We should celebrate that we have been an important waystation for so many seekers. And those of us who have found a permanent home in Unitarian Universalism can always benefit from the insights of those who sojourn with us for a time long or short. And while I certainly agree that we need to share more of Unitarian Universalist history and identity, I would support even more exploration of other traditions.

Many of those who come to UU congregations have already explored Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism without being entirely satisfied. Others have come from or explored other traditions religious and philosophical. Most of our members mention the sense of loving community as one of the biggest reasons why they would remain in our congregation. Even introverts, of which there are many in UU congregations, need contact with other persons and most of us appreciate the safety and support of a community which values respect and acceptance. Particularly in a small congregation, we will not meet the spiritual, philosophical, and life needs of all persons, but we have a lot to offer, and as more members and friends become active there will be even more things that we can offer. Some congregations offer Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Pagan, and Humanist interest, study, or worship groups as well as other interest groups by age, status, gender or covenant. There are few interests or traditions that would not be fair game if a group of people wanted to start a group or gathering.

One metaphor for inclusive beliefs that has appealed to many Unitarian Universalists is the idea of the Perennial Philosophy. This image suggests that there are many paths up the mountain of truth. We may take any path, with the one most familiar to us by traditions of origin or choice being a likely best choice. Each path takes a different route, but each path leads ultimately to the same truth, whatever that may be.

I like that image because it suggests that we may journey together or parallel each other on nearby paths as we explore and discover whatever we encounter on the path we are following. We experience many different things on our different paths but we can each appreciate the journey.

Another metaphor for religious choices that works well for Unitarian Universalism is a rich buffet or pot-luck in which we can sample many traditions, seeking the benefits of the whole array of religious and philosophical ideas which have inspired humanity through the ages. And of course one of the choices is to stay at the buffet as a Unitarian Universalist, enjoying the best of all religious and philosophical choices while remaining free to claim whichever such ideas fit us best at any particular point in our life along with the freedom to change our choice and fill a new plate!

Yet another metaphor used for the blending of ideas in the American experience is the melting pot which may result in what has been at times called civil religion, but that does not seem to include the choice Unitarian Universalists have to select a particular path, plate, or tradition while still participating fully in the UU Community. This is not however to say that practitioners of that Melting Pot refined Civil Religion would be less welcome than any others so long as they are respectful and accepting! There is plenty of room for hyphenated UUs: especially Christian-UUs, Jewish-UUs, Buddhist-UUs, Pagan-UUs, or Humanist-UUs! The core of each of these traditions fits well with our UU Principles and Sources, though judgmental and exclusionary practices of certain branches of each tradition may fit less well.

Even though I am most familiar with the Judeo-Christian religious heritage, I deeply appreciate the freedom to explore other religious and philosophical traditions, and especially humanism, while also gaining from the scientific discoveries of our time. I have long believed that Unitarian Universalism is the best choice for modern practitioners of religion, but I certainly recognize the value of other choices.

Bring your beliefs of origin and of choice, bring your questions, bring your discoveries, bring those cutting-edge issues of your life and the modern world. All these things are welcome in this and every Unitarian Universalist community. Stay with us for a while or for your lifetime. Come as you are, remain as you may change, build with us that Blessed Community that we all need!

May the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism continue to challenge and welcome each of us, and may we each continue to learn and grow through this week, this year, and all our days!

So May it Be, Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!

The sermon in a UU Congregation is never the final word on any subject. I once again open the floor for your comments!

UU 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; 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.