

August 14, 2016

Sunday Sermon: UU Seven Principles: Is Something Missing?

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In 1985, the General Assembly of the UUA adopted our current Principles by a nearly unanimous vote (there was one vote against).² Since then, the Principles have become part of the fabric of the UUA. The principles and the fact that we are non-doctrinal are generally viewed as key aspects of the UU tradition. UUs around the country can point to these seven principles and say, “Yes, that is what we UUs believe as “strong values and moral guides.”

Everywhere you look, you find the Principles. In 1995, when Marian and I first came to this church, we attended an introductory session led by Stephen Kendrick. When we came in to the meeting, he had the principles written on a flip chart and began by explaining their importance in Unitarian Universalism. I’m certain similar introductory presentations are made in churches throughout the country. The principles are prominent on the UUA website, and they are in our hymnal (They and the sources are one page before the first hymn.), and the principles were used as touchstones in selecting the hymns and readings for the hymnal. The Principles are on wallet-size cards, and many UUs refer to them as part of their “elevator speeches.” And in the last few weeks, our church has put cards with the principles in the pews. Yes, the current principles are indeed part of the fabric of Unitarian Universalism.

Before our current Principles, there was another statement of principles adopted in 1960 when the two denominations were in the process of uniting. Those original principles were not a unifying force in the new denomination. In fact, some of the wording almost derailed the merger. “The contention revolved around whether to include such phrases as ‘love to God and love to man’ and a reference to ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage.’” A compromise version was finally hammered out in an all-day, all-night parliamentary negotiation and debate.”

There was continuing dissatisfaction with these original principles (if you read them from today’s perspective, you can see why), and in 1981, the General Assembly formed a 7-person committee to develop a new set of principles. This

committee wrote to all UU churches and fellowships and to all ministers asking for proposals and suggestions. The best of the suggestions were circulated for further comment and input. The committee presented their preliminary report at the 1982 GA, and those at the GA broke into small groups with facilitators to discuss the language. Based on these discussions, the committee created another draft that was circulated to all congregations for comment and then debated at the next GA. The final draft was approved at the 1984 GA and then enthusiastically adopted in 1985.

The chair of the drafting committee, the Rev. Walter Royal Jones, reflected that "apart from Quakers and their time-honored preference for consensus, it is unlikely that the history of religion provides any comparable example of such intentional and committed use of inclusive, non-hierarchical processes to produce a guiding statement."

There were, of course, some rough spots on the way to this overwhelming support for the new Principles. Not surprisingly, the most troublesome was whether to refer to God and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Some were upset by the presence of such references and others were upset by their absence. A committee member came up with a solution: divide the statement into two parts: first the Seven Principles and then their sources, the six living traditions we share. There were no objections to having "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love" as the fourth source in "an uncontroversial summary of historical influences on UUism." (Warren R Ross, "Shared Values," *UU World*, Nov./Dec. 2000)

So, there is no question that the Seven Principles are important strong values and moral guides that are a central part of the UU identity today along with our having no doctrinal statement of belief. In the rest of my time this morning, I want to explore two questions about the Principles. First, are they distinctive to Unitarian Universalism, distinguishing us from other faith communities? Second, are there other principles and values that are also part of the fabric of Unitarian Universalism?

Distinctiveness

As to the distinctiveness of our Principles, many of them actually align us very well with other faith communities and with the broader culture of the US and

much of the rest of the world. For instance, Bob Bellah and his co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* in 1985 quote a Gallup poll in which 80% of the respondents agreed that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.” If the question were asked today, probably even more than 80% would agree. In a journal article in 1998, Bellah explored if there is a common American culture. “[His] answer was yes, there is a common culture, and that its most fundamental tenet is the sacredness of the individual conscience, the individual person.” That’s very close to our first Principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every individual,” and the first part of our fifth Principle, “the right of conscience.” Our fourth principle, free and responsible search for meaning” is closely akin to the American commitment to freedom of religion.

Many in the US and much of the world share both parts of our fifth Principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,” For instance, one of the highlighted resolutions at the Southern Baptist convention this spring was in support of the right of conscience for all, especially Christians who were asked to do things that are contrary to their beliefs. A similar support for the right of conscience is part of the Republican platform this year. Almost all the nations and cultures of the world support the principle of democracy as a means of expressing the will of the people, although often without adequate support also for the institutions of civil society that limit the possible tyranny of the majority.

Yes, many of our principles are not distinctive. Instead, they put us in the mainstream of our society. That’s not surprising, given the bottom-up inclusive process by which the principles were written. And the fact that the principles are not distinctively Unitarian Universalist is in many ways positive because they can be the basis for collaboration and cooperation with other groups that also share those principles.

Let’s look a little closer at the religious and philosophical roots of the Principles. The underlying socio-philosophical motif of most of the Seven Principles is *individualism* and the *autonomy of the individual*, which is also an underlying motif for much of American culture. *Autonomous individualism* is embraced and invoked by commentators and activists across the social and political spectrum and is embodied in the principles of individual freedom enshrined in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. The cultural and philosophy roots

of this *autonomous individualism* is in the English Enlightenment of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period when Unitarianism and Universalism and our political systems were all developing. The Enlightenment philosophers in turn were influenced by the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber, the German sociologist in fact argued that the roots of “all modern notions of human rights [are] to be found in the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation, particularly the Quakers and the Baptists.”³

As reflected in many of our Principles, UUs cherish the Enlightenment’s focus on individualism, the freedom of conscience, the inherent worth of the individual, and the freedom of the individual to search for meaning and religious belief. But the focus on individualism has other consequences that many UUs are probably less comfortable with. Freedom of conscience and religious and philosophical freedom are closely linked with the freedom of enterprise and the right of individuals to pursue their own economic interests. The radical sects of the Protestant Reformation are the sources for both our modern notions of human rights and the rise of capitalism and the Protestant ethic with individuals pursuing their own economic self-interests. The English Enlightenment gave us not only the philosophies of Locke and Hume but also the economic philosophy of Adam Smith. As uncomfortable as it may be for many of us, freedom of conscience on the one hand and freedom to pursue one’s own economic interests on the other are closely related aspects of individualism. As Bellah puts it, “radical religio-cultural individualism opens the door to radical economic individualism. The former provides inadequate resources to moderate the latter”⁴ because both are based on the autonomy of the individual.

While the predominant theme in the Seven Principles is individualism, there are some of the Principles that have more of a collective orientation that help separate the philosophical and economic aspects of individual freedom. The second Principle, “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” requires collective action, although perhaps primarily in defense of the individual. The last two principles, “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” and “respect for the interdependent web of all existence” move our focus outside the individual and into a supportive community striving for common and collective goals.

Other UU Principles and strong values and moral guides

Let me know turn to the second question of whether there are other core UU principles and values. The answer is clearly “Yes.” These other principles and values in some ways complement the Seven Principles and in other ways serve as counter-balances. They also help moderate the more selfish aspects of individualism. The first, as reflected in our hymns this morning, is the challenging and powerful principle of *love*. Meeting the challenge of love moves us outside of ourselves and focuses on addressing both the needs of others as individuals and on improving the institutions and organizations in which individuals are embedded. Universalists have traditionally focused more on love than have Unitarians, but love is now part of the fabric of the entire denomination, as evidenced by the policy and program theme of “Standing on the Side of Love.”

I think a second and related principle and value is *empathy*, which is an important way of putting our principle of love into action. Have you noticed that Many, including some in other religious traditions, who value the principles of individualism and individual freedom are primarily concerned with advancing and applying them for themselves and their group? They focus more on preserving and extending the principles for themselves than they do on supporting these principles for others. In contrast, Unitarian Universalists by policy and action strive to apply these principles to others as much or more than to themselves. We value trying to put ourselves in the positions of others and to think about how our principles should also apply to them. Unitarian Universalists are not unique in our striving for empathy across boundaries and diversity, but I think it is certainly another core principle that UUs value.

Our lack of doctrine may actually make it easier for us to foster empathy because we don't have any wall of doctrine separating the believers from the non-believers. We can reach out to all with empathy. As Edwin Markham wrote,

He drew a circle that shut me out--

Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!

In fact, with no doctrine binding us together and with the diversity of our backgrounds and personal faiths, we may also have to practice empathy with each other more than those in some other churches do.

Another principle and value that is part of the fabric of Unitarian Universalism is *community*. In part, this social dimension of our faith tradition is rooted in the ontologically social nature of all humans and other higher mammals. As Frans de Waal, noted,

Even in our species, which prides itself on free will, we may find an occasional hermit who has opted for reclusion; yet we never encounter someone who has consciously decided to become social. One cannot decide to become what one already is.⁵

But community has a special place in Unitarian Universalism, as was so eloquently stated in the commission report *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* in our second reading. Let me repeat the key section so you can think about it again:

Being part of a religious community is a personal commitment that reflects a theological vision—namely, a sense of the fundamentally interdependent, or covenantal, nature of existence. Being in community, then, is not incidental to being a Unitarian Universalist, but intrinsic and inescapable. The religious community is the vital matrix of the formation of its members' diverse personal ministries. In turn its members reshape the community.

For UUs, the church community is the nexus where we nurture and put into action our principle of Love; where we support each other in our spiritual quests and support each other through the highs and lows of life; where we empathetically address the needs of others outside our church community; and where we join together to advance our shared principles. The church community shapes us, but we also reshape the community. Without the strength and support of each other in community, our principles would lose much of their potential power and effectiveness in the world. Thus, to realize our principles, we in turn must strengthen, support, and improve our community.

May it be so.

End Notes

1. The thoughts in the sermon have been stimulated by many sources, but a primary one was the thought-provoking talk by Robert N. Bellah, “Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective,” at the UUA General Assembly, June 27, 1998. Available on-line at http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/bellahrobert/980627_uu_societal_perspective.pdf. Robert Bellah was Elliott Professor of Sociology Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley after being at both Harvard and Berkeley. Among his many publications, he co-authored *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985).
2. The information and quotes about the adoption of the Seven Principles in 1985 come from Warren R. Ross, “Shared Principles: How the UU Principles and Purposes were adopted,” *UU World Magazine*, November/December 2000. Available on-line at <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted> .
3. Quoted by Bellah, 1998, pp. 5-6.
4. Bellah, 1998, p. 6.
5. Quoted by Bellah, 1998, p. 7.