

Unitarian Universalism: A Radical Vision for 21st Century Religion

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It is the time of the Autumnal Equinox, a time of balance, as the nights grow longer and we begin to turn inward. It is also the time of the Jewish New Year, similarly, a time to reflect on where we've been and where we're going.

As anyone who's been to a worship service led by me knows, I like to include a bit of scripture. In the past, you've heard me read from the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Buddha-carita. So when I was asked to preach on Unitarian Universalism, I was at a loss of what I might pick for the reading. Should I pick something from the Christian bible, as our Universalist and Unitarian forebears might have? Or perhaps there was some foundational sermon or text I could use, like Emerson's Divinity School Address. Or perhaps abandon the idea of reading from a sacred text altogether. In the end, I settled on the 7 principles. We don't have a creed, but if we did, this would be it. We don't have a sacred text, but if we did, this would be it. I imagine that for many of us, if we were asked what UUism stands for, we might cite the 7 principles, starting with:

1. The inherent **worth** and **dignity** of every person;

If you know only one of the seven principles, it's likely this one. "We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Or perhaps you've seen a slightly revised version, "of every **one**," which I admit, I prefer. Either way, at first glance, that seems hard to argue with. What sensible person could take issue with this? "Inherent worth and dignity," okay, "of *every* one." *Everyone*? Even Hitler? I'll be honest with you, when I think about this principle a bit further, when I try to apply it to certain individuals, I find it a bit challenging. Sure, I can get onboard with the inherent worth and dignity of every *class* of person, but when it comes to certain individuals, particularly some of those in politics, where they are literally destroying people's lives, it's hard for me to affirm and promote their inherent worth and dignity. Suddenly, what at first seemed so simple a principle, is not so anymore.

This principle, and the theological stance behind it, that our creator loves us all, is a challenge, and not one to be taken lightly. Which brings us to our second principle:

2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Here we go from the people out there to the person right in front of me, because "human relations" doesn't just mean relations between other humans, it includes all of my relations as well. It's easy to say "people" should treat each other with justice, equity, and compassion. It's a bit harder to say, "I commit to treating all people with justice, equity, and compassion," yes, even that jerk who cut you off this morning. But that's exactly what our principles are calling us to do. And it's hard!

I've heard it said that the word "charity" actually derives from the notion of emulating God's love for creation. That is, God loves all creatures, and we should do likewise. Sadly, the word "charity" has taken on a meaning that has less to do with fraternal love and more to do with some kind of paternalism which often does more harm than good, but that's beside the point.

Ultra-Universalists and Humanists alike believe that there is no Hell but what we create on Earth. If we are to do otherwise, we are called upon to promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

Justice, equity, and compassion form a kind of triad. Thomas Aquinas has said that, "Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; justice without mercy is cruelty." I think we could fairly replace with word "mercy" with "compassion" in this case and reach the same meaning. Equity stands in between the two. This brings us to our third principle:

3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

Here we take that unconditional love that we've inherited from our Universalist forebears, and we give it direction. Because it is not only that we accept one another (and ourselves), but we also encourage spiritual growth and change. Unitarian Universalism is forward-looking. One of the things I like about the wording of this principle is the ambiguity of "in our congregations." I'm not sure if it means the spiritual growth of individuals within our congregations, or the spiritual growth of our congregations themselves. I choose to interpret it to mean both. Which brings us to the fourth principle:

4. A **free** and responsible **search for truth** and meaning;

I remember a colleague of mine at Starr King saying she felt that this was the principle our congregations needed to pay the most attention to, particularly that word "responsible." This is, perhaps, where our principles start to shift from our Universalist parentage to our Unitarian one, bringing in some of that critical thinking Unitarians are known for. That is to say, as a denomination, we affirm and promote a free search for truth and meaning, but that search must be responsible. What does responsible mean? It can mean many things, but I would start with two: first, it should be coherent. Second, it should be respectful.

The way I see it, we are free to read and learn from the whole world of traditions. Every search for truth and meaning throughout the history of our species is available to us. But, lest we

fall into the trap of religious tourism and cultural misappropriation, we must be responsible in that search. I do not believe that all cultural appropriation is misappropriation. In fact, there is no such thing as culture without appropriation. But coming with such privilege as we do, as residents of the United States if nothing more, we have a special responsibility to treat the cultures we encounter with humility and respect.

5. The right of conscience and the use of the **democratic** process within our congregations and in society at large;

“Democratic process,” words that sound more like they belong in *Robert’s Rules of Order* than in the principles of a religious community. I admit, I find it hard to get excited by words like “democratic process.” And yet, if there was ever a time to get enthusiastic about democratic process in the last hundred years, it would be today. We find that trust and support for the democratic process is at an all time low, leaving the field open to would-be tyrants and despots. And why shouldn’t people be skeptical of the value of democracy when democracy itself has been so perverted by corporate interests?

Of all seven principles, I find that this one points to a quality in our denomination which I think is very important, is perhaps why I’m a Unitarian Universalist to begin with, and that is its practicality. UUism is concerned with the world, which brings us to the sixth principle:

6. The goal of **world community** with **peace**, liberty, and **justice** for all;

In preparing for this service, I read the sermon given at the announcement of the Unitarian and Universalist merger in 1960. It seems that even then there was a concern that “With us liberals, liberty has too often meant laxity.” In an essay I was reading about Christian preaching, the author, warns the preacher not to ‘leave the church with an “empty” freedom. Rather, the old practices shaped by the powers must be replaced by the practices of the new creation.’ In other words, “freedom from” is not sufficient. Otherwise we end up with a “casual faith”, something our UUA president warned us about at this year’s General Assembly. No, if we are free, it is for this purpose, to promote a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. I will add that we see here again that balancing triad from before, only “compassion” has been replaced with “peace” to make it more fitting for the world stage, and “equity” has been replaced with “liberty”.

The basic ideas of these six principles appeared in the 1961 statement issued at the founding of our Unitarian Universalist Association. I tend to associate the first three with our Universalist impulse towards love, and the later three with our Unitarian impulse towards reason. Love and Reason I see as the core values of our tradition, and I see them tempering each other.

Then, in the 1980s, a seventh principle was added:

7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

While the seeds of this can be found in both our Universalist and Unitarian ancestry, I think it can more readily be seen in traditions outside of our Christian heritage, particularly Buddhist and indigenous, which has had an increasing influence on our own denomination since its founding. What you may have noticed is that these seven principles, arranged in the order they are, take us from the individual, through the congregation, into society at large, and finally out into the universe as a whole. But throughout it all there exists a radical all-inclusive love tempered by a rational engagement with reality. This, to me, is what Unitarian Universalism is all about.