

Article II: Principles vs. Values

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Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists have always been in a dilemma: we find it easier to say what we don't believe in than what we do. Many of us have left more orthodox faiths such as Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism, Methodism or Presbyterianism, where the beliefs are on public display. In my Episcopal childhood, we said some variant of the Nicene Creed every Sunday. Maybe some of you traveled a similar journey, or are traveling it now.

We live in a world built of words and we are no more aware of that than fish are aware of the water in which they swim. Most of us don't question most of the time the adequacy of words to capture reality, but three types of humans do: the poets, the priests and the lawyers.

Liberalism is closely allied with pluralism and with diversity. A liberal arts education, such as you might get at a liberal arts college, is based on the idea that truth will emerge from a clash of ideas in a setting where all are respectful of others and there are ground rules for the encounter. Liberal religion, similarly,

says that each person can seek his or her own truth and there is no ultimate authority saying what truth is.

The most important meaning of the Protestant Reformation is that the Bible got substituted for the church as the path to heaven, and the source of ultimate authority and the function of the minister was to help the congregants understand God's word in the Bible.

When liberal religion developed on the fringes of Protestantism, the minister was downgraded even further, so that what we say from the pulpit today is not claimed as everlasting truth, but as the way one person sees it on a given day.

So the great religious questions – is God one person or three or a figment of our imaginations, is there life after death, is there a soul and what happens to it, is there a purpose for the universe – all of these questions are ones we live, but do not seek to answer definitively or finally. I used to have a bumper sticker which proclaimed “God is too big for any one religion,” not because I knew what or who God is, but I knew that there were other things in the world – black holes, dark matter, the big bang – which were beyond the capacity of language to explain, and I figured that if that were the case, and if God were anything as huge as He was

usually made out to be, it would not be possible to capture God in any word or set of words.

Not that it isn't worth trying. My late mentor Victor Cappenter was fond of saying that "Unitarian Universalists are people who seek to eff the ineffable." We do explore the limits of belief and the limits of language, and that's what we'll be doing today.

I am playing catch-up ball here. One of the jobs of an interim minister, that is, a minister who follows on a long-term settled minister as is the case here, is to try to keep the congregation up-to-date on what is happening in the larger world of the denomination. I have not yet addressed article II in my preaching here, and that is an important development in UU land. I will be giving my take on it this morning, and to give you another perspective, I have invited as my guest next week a seminarian from BU named Lindsay Donnelly Bullington to give you a different take on the subject.

If you look on the back cover of your Order of Service, you will find the present version of what are called the Principles and Purposes. The first thing that needs saying is that this is not a creed. It does not state articles of belief, but it states aspirations for how we want to treat one another.

Both Unitarians and Universalists had many verbal formulations of their faith before they joined forces in 1961, but there was a considerable gap between the two of them and it became hard to say just what UU stood for. So the General Assembly, the annual meeting, wrote out these principles and they were passed finally in 1985. There were six principles at first, the seventh was added later.

What's the difference between these principles and a creed? When I said a creed every Sunday a child, I was stating that I believed several historical facts. Jesus, the historical person who was born in Bethlehem and died on the cross in Jerusalem, was the only son of God, and though he was killed, he was resurrected and went to heaven to preside with his father. There also was a third "person" in the "Godhead" named the Holy Spirit which mediated with humans. I also recited a belief that all those who followed Jesus could inherit eternal life, that is we would not die. Among many other facts.

Somewhere in my teenage years, I ceased being able to say that I believed all those things. Yet I loved the church, the fellowship and the aesthetics of it. So 10 years later when I first walked into a Unitarian Church, I saw the stained-glass windows and the hymnals and the pews and it looked so much like the churches I'd loved in my childhood and I asked the person showing me around, "what do

you have to believe to go to this church?” The answer came, “we don’t have a creed; you don’t even have to believe in God.” I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

But what is the difference between the Principles and Purposes that the UUA endorses and the creeds of the orthodox Christian faiths? The creed comes right out and says I believe this actually happened, Jesus actually rose from the dead and all the rest of it. The principles are more subtle. Look at them page on the back of your Order of Service. The First Principle has language about the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It may seem like we are expressing a belief that every person is worthy and has dignity. But if you think about the words “worth” and “dignity” those are characteristics a person can have, it is not an on/off, either/or proposition. You can’t walk out in the street and say, “this person has worth, that person has dignity.” Then you look at the words which precede the whole list: “we covenant,” that is we promise, we agree, “to affirm and promote.” When you put the substantive language with the language of the preamble, we are not expressing a belief in a state of fact, we are not saying that every person we meet in life has inherent worth and dignity. What we are saying, instead, is a statement of ethics: as we encounter people in the course of our lives,

we are going to treat each one *as if they have* inherent worth and dignity.

Do you see the difference now between a creed and a covenant? There is a bet we make with ourselves, not that everyone we encounter will be worthy, whatever that means, but that if we treat them as if they were, we will all be better off for it.

So those are the Principles UUs live by and have since 1984. Are they still good? That depends on who you ask.

When you have a set of words that you feel has transcendent importance, you can etch them into granite monuments, but there is another way you can signify permanence: you can put them into a legal document. The Principles and purposes are incorporated in the by-laws which establish the Unitarian Universalist Association as a corporate entity. They are Article II of those by-laws.

And it was always contemplated that they were subject to revision. In fact, they were revisited as recently as 2010, and the changes proposed in that year failed on the floor of General Assembly by only a small margin.

2017 was a hinge year for the UUA. There was a controversy over a hiring decision at the senior staff level, and in the resulting conflict, Rev. Peter Morales,

our first Latino president, resigned. A three-member committee made up entirely of Black UUs was appointed to lead the denomination for a few months until a scheduled election for President could happen. That committee created a Commission on Institutional Change to more thoroughly examine why the UUA's efforts to combat racism did not produce results that most had wished for. That Commission studied the problem for three years and reported its findings in 2020 in a report entitled *Widening the Circle of Concern*.

That report was published soon after the killing of George Floyd reminded us all of the continuing problems of racism in society. There was a discussion of drafting an eighth principle to explicitly cover anti-racism, but that morphed into an examination of the whole structure of Principles and Purposes which came to be called the Article II Commission.

Recently, in January 2023, that Commission published its report. It will go forward with discussions between now and June, and then will come to a vote on the floor of General Assembly in Pittsburg. It needs a simple majority to pass, and then that vote would need to be confirmed in the 2024 General Assembly for the change to be made permanent.

In creating the Article II Commission, the UUA Board said this to the

Commission:

“The Article II Study Commission is hereby charged to review Article II of the UUA Bylaws, and propose any revisions that will enable our UUA, our member congregations, and our covenanted communities to be a relevant and powerful force for spiritual and moral growth, healing, and justice. Proposed changes should articulate core UU theological values. The Board believes that one core theological value, shared widely among UUs, is love.”

We have long recognized the paradox that our supposed central value is love but that that word does not appear in the Principles and Purposes. I can remember my colleague Fred Small pointing that out with outrage a quarter-century ago. So here the UUA Board is starting out its charge to the Article II Commission by saying “and don’t forget love.”

The UUA Board expressed the scope of the Committee’s work very broadly:

“The Commission is charged with reviewing all sections of Article II, and is free to revise, replace, or restructure them as needed to meet the objectives stated above. There is nothing sacred about the

number of principles or sources, nor their specific wordings, nor in the way that Article II is laid out. We encourage creativity. The Board would like to see an Article II that is inspirational, memorable and poetic. The language should be inclusive and welcoming, and explicitly anti-racist. Article II, it must be remembered, are broad statements of Principle and Purpose, not detailed programmatic or implementation plans.”

It would be nice if the result were more poetic. It has often been said of the Principles and Purposes that, while they effectively reach a broad agreement on liberal theology, no dying person is likely to call for them to be read at their bedside.

The draft that the Article II Commission has given us takes the Board’s wide latitude and fully occupies it. I am only going to deal with one aspect of that here this morning: they jettisoned the idea of principles and instead identified values. They even made a graphic layout of the values they considered important, it’s on the front cover of your Order of Service.

Here is the Commission’s explanation of its reasons for jettisoning principles and adopting values:

“The principles express a shared ethic and imply a certain theology—one that values the individual, growth, the natural world, and diversity. But it does not name these values explicitly, nor does it name many other values important to us collectively. It also gives no guidance on how we might approach living out these values in our congregations and the world. It declares itself to be a covenant, but the only actions it asks of congregations are to “affirm and promote” certain concepts. We believe we should expect more from a covenant. As one member put it, ‘we need more verbs.’”

“For some, the current Principles also serve as a theological statement, a personal code of ethics and a way to evangelize by explaining who we are. For all these reasons, we felt we would be better served by a structure in which we articulate our shared values and then use these values as the ground for aspirational statements of action. Seven single-word values (each with a short sentence of explication) are easier to remember and use as touchstones in our conversations, in congregational governance,

and in educational settings.”

So the Article II Commission proposes that seven single-word values substitute for seven principles, but there is not a one-to-one correlation between the old principle and the new values. The seven values in the flower graphic are Love at the center and Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity and Justice. Each of these values has a short explanation for example:

“Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.”

“Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.”

I have just begun to think about this, but I am not sure that we gain anything by moving from principles to values. When I went Googling the question what is the difference between principles and values, I got this:

“Principles are the rules or beliefs that govern your behavior.

Principles are built upon your values. A principle is the behavior, response, or action in which you fulfill values. For example, if a value you have is honesty, a principle may be to never tell lies.”

We have a persistent problem in Unitarian Universalism, and its more basic than racism. I join in the frustration that racism is still a problem when we have been trying to fight it in our own domains for fifty years at least. But it is also a widespread problem in the society in general.

The problem which is more specific to UUs is that we are trying to create and sustain a religion in which there are no core theological beliefs. The UUA Board has tasked the Article II Commission with drafting something which represents our core theological beliefs, but there was a report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal on the 1990s which sought to find whether there was a core of theological beliefs and it came to the conclusion that there were none. Theologically, Unitarian Universalism is like a donut. There is a great big hole in the center.

So you have the task of coming up with a set of words which will keep everyone loyal to the institution, general enough that almost everyone can agree

with it, and not specific enough to drive anyone away.

And the Commission said that they were dissatisfied with the principles because they did not lead to action, they needed more verbs. But the change to values gives you fewer verbs, not more. It is principles which have the closer links to behavior.

A principle is at least a few words strung together into a sentence. As such, it gives more guidance for action than does a one-word value. Anything expressed in one word is going to be heavily reliant on context for its meaning.

You will find many words drawn from the present principles scattered throughout the little sentences which explain the values, but they do not add to coherence, in my book. They detract.

And this is to be expected: as I have maintained in my preaching for the 22 years I have been a preacher, incoherence is the price we all pay for our inclusiveness. Neither is a bad trait, it is just that one is in tension with the other. When we seek to be all things to all people, we run the risk of being nothing to anybody. As we reach to take in more points of view, we risk being a religion that is a mile wide and an inch deep.

I am just encountering this issue for the first time myself, but if I were to

vote on it tomorrow, I would vote it down. But the day after tomorrow, I might change my mind.

I will close these thoughts with the words with which the Article II commission closed its report, about permanence:

“We recognize the fact the proposed version of Article II we have presented is indeed a significant departure from our current version, just as past changes to Article II were significant changes from their predecessors. The 1985 version which first introduced the Principles was a radical change from the Purposes and Objectives of the previous version. We are continuing in the line of proposing changes that fit the times in which we live. We fully expect that one day another Commission will review our work and significantly change it. We are writing this in pencil, not etching it in stone.”

Amen.