

A Philosophical Look at the Seven Principles

Good morning!... Thank you, Susan, for your kind introduction; for planning the service; and for reading my favorite quote about philosophy. Thank you, Gerri, for your lively music. It takes a lot of work to put together a Sunday Service and I applaud all who have been involved. And, I thank the Fellowship for the opportunity to speak today. *I consider it an honor and a privilege.*

Last November we had a wonderful message from Jeff Percy,...a look at the UU principles through a photographer's *lens*. Philosophers, of course, want to be *much closer* to the truth than that!...So, this first Sunday in November, I will provide a look at the UU principles through a philosopher's *eyes*! (Jaded, though they might be!) First,...some background...and history.

The seven principles have been well rehearsed in the UU literature, and within this fellowship, particularly in the “*Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*” classes offered for new and prospective members. I'm sure you all know the principles. But, just in case,...here is a refresher course!

“Whereas, the great opportunities and demands for Christian labor and consecration at this time increase our sense of the obligations of all disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to prove their faith by self-denial and by the devotion of their lives and possessions to the service of God and the building up of the Kingdom of his Son –...Therefore,...the Christian churches of the Unitarian faith here assembled unite themselves in a common body...”

Oh, sorry,...wrong principles! This was the proclamation for an earlier set of Unitarian principles,...*those from the Unitarian Covenant of 1865*, at the end of the Civil War. What said

our someday to be Universalist brethren? Again, I quote:

“The essential principles of the Universalist faith are these: The Universal Fatherhood of God; the spiritual authority and leadership of His Son Jesus Christ; the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God; the certainty of just retribution for sin; and the final harmony of all souls with God.”

This was the Universalist Proclamation of 1899, thirty-four years after the Unitarian Covenant of 1865. No wonder the two religions merged in 1961! *What did they have to lose?!*

Lucky for us modern Unitarian Universalism is defined by the 1986 Principles, those created 25 years after the 1961 merger. Here then are those seven important principles,...the ones you do all know! (If not, please refer to the bookmark that has been placed in your order of service... at my expense, I might add! I did *not* charge them to the Fellowship,...even though I *am* a member of the Finance Committee!)

1st: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

2nd: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3rd: Acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth;

4th: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th: The right of conscience, and the use of the democratic process;

6th: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and

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

To quote from the “Virginia Slims” cigarette ad from the 1960’s: *“You Unitarian Universalists have come a long way baby!”*

The seven UU principles just recited are remarkably close to the principles of just the Unitarian Church of 1961,.. *before* the merger with the Universalist Church that year, and well

before the 1986 statement. Dare one ask, “Why then a merger in ‘61?” I don’t know the answer to that question, but I believe it is worthy of further investigation. It should also be noted that one of the principles, the 7th, was not added until 1995, *nine years after the 1986 statement* and the adoption of the original six principles by the joint UU committee. In 1995 it was determined that Unitarian Universalists must acknowledge:

“the 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.”

And, well we should acknowledge it. We can thank Native Americans for providing this significant idea of their culture to ours, particularly in this the “Month of Native American Heritage.” I shall return to their important insight later in the message.

The seven modern UU principles do not stand alone. They are backed by what the Unitarian Universalist Association call the *Six Sources*. I’m not sure why there aren’t seven sources, to match the seven principles! Then again, originally there were only five sources and six principles! So, as a logician, I have concluded that if UUs had no sources, there would still be one principle! But, we’ll let the differences in math go for now! Besides, “sources” sound way too Biblical for me! So, I will concentrate on a philosophical look at the seven principles!

Note first that there are actually nine principles, not seven! (*Unitarians do seem to struggle with math!*) Principle #3 is a conjunction, asking for “*acceptance* of one another” and “*encouragement* to spiritual growth.” These are clearly two *entirely* different things! Unless, of course, you mean sitting around a campfire with people you don’t like,...and singing Kumbaya!!

Principle #5 is also a duple, calling for “the *right* of conscience” and “the *use* of the democratic process.” These, too, are entirely different enjoinments. Long and short of it,...there are nine UU principles as stated, not seven!...*No wonder outsiders are confused about Unitarian Universalism!*

And, that confusion runs deep... I find that most people think Unitarian Universalism is some kind of cult religion,...a product of the mid-20th century, having its roots in the hippie counter-culture of the ‘60’s! But, as I am sure you all know,...*because you took the Introduction to UU course...*the roots of Unitarian Universalism are much older and deeper than that,...particularly if you separate Unitarianism from Universalism. *The earliest version of Unitarianism dates to the first century A.D.!* Unitarianism was based upon the belief that the Trinity was false,...that there was only one God, not three, thus, a “unity,”...which led to the word “Unitarian.” Very clever! Linguistically,...theologically and...mathematically! If it is ever determined that there is *no* God, UU’s will, of course, then be known as “*Nonitarians!*”

But, what about Universalism? As a religion, it came about much later,...in the 17th century in fact. The Universalist’s essential belief was that everyone was entitled to salvation, there being no privileged groups...They stole this idea from the Lutherans, of course,...and, long before Garrison Keillor and the Minnesota Lutherans! But, I am not here to parse the differences between Unitarianism and Universalism, nor to recount the histories of each. Check out the available literature on your own if you want the history and the finer points of difference between the two religions. It is really *quite* interesting. But, I warn you,...that literature identifies *23 different organizations* that claim to speak for one side or the other of Unitarian Universalism...or for both!.....*Surely, this does not surprise you!*... Plus, it serves to keep outsiders guessing about who

Unitarian Universalists are and what they really believe!... O.K., let me get to the philosophy part of the message...

I want to do two things today. First, provide a taxonomy of the UU principles, i.e., a categorization identifying the major areas of philosophy represented by each (or, at least most of them!) This categorization is instructive in order to understand the nature of the principles and their purpose. Second, I want to identify two important modern philosophical theories that are arguably the basis for modern Unitarian Universalism. Do not be confused here by the term “modern.” By philosophical “modern,” I mean the 17th & 18th century! By UU “modern,” I mean after 1986! While the identification of modern UUism with modern philosophy is not proclaimed by the UUA, I hope my association will prove instructive...at least worthy of further discussion. *Modern Unitarian Universalism has support from two of the most important philosophical theories of the 17th and 18th century...even if Unitarian Universalists didn't intend it or perhaps don't recognize it.*

Originally, I had planned a third endeavor for today...a *critical* analysis of the UU principles. A complete philosophical look at the principles would, of course, require that critical analysis. But, time does not permit it. Perhaps another Sunday...*or, maybe not...*, as I suspect you are all hoping at this point!

Being a philosopher, you might expect that I would find the most important principle to be #4: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” After all, philosophy is the love of wisdom (the ancient Greek definition of the term); and, philosophy's primary aim is *the search for truth*. It

is the practice of principle #4 that is necessary for establishing the veracity of the other six principles. *Without a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the other principles can't get off the ground.* Principle #4 falls within that area of philosophy we call “epistemology,” the area that examines the concepts of knowledge and truth. But, what is truth? And, how would the discovery of it provide meaning and direction for our lives, as the Unitarian Affirmation suggests? For this, we need to ask another important question: “*What did Unitarians know, and when did they know it?!*”... For that answer,...you need to listen to Rik Warch’s 2007 Sunday message...“Oh Lighten Up and Other Modern Truths!” The podcast is still available on the Fellowship website.

Principle #4 is also a source of humor! If Unitarians truly believe in the search for truth and meaning, wouldn't you expect that after all this time they would have an answer to the simple question: How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb?!”.... But, no,...they offer the following:

“Unitarians choose not to make a statement, either in favour of, or against, the need for a light bulb! However, if, in your journey, you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is delightful! You are invited to write a poem, compose a modern dance, or paint a picture about your personal relationship with light bulbs! Present it next month, at our now annual Light Bulb Sunday Service, at which time we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, long-life, tinted, and...even...(oh, my!)...three-way...all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence! Whatever you do, whatever you decide, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, just know that you are invited...next Friday night...for a light (bulb) supper!”

I really wish I had written this!... But, I cannot take credit! The joke comes from the web site of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada...a very progressive Unitarian church, where,...by the way, Pam and I have just signed the membership book! (O.K., just a joke UUFDC Membership Committee!)

Note that while each of the seven UU principles express values, they are not all of a piece. Three of the principles (#1, #2, and the first part of #3) express *moral* values, and provide a prescription for *ethical* action, *ethics* being another important area of philosophy,...perhaps the most important ... Yet another, principle #6, expresses a value that outlines a *vision* for the future. This vision is ethical as well, but also suggests a basis for *spirituality*...*Belief in the future requires hope...Hope requires vision...Vision is based in spirituality*...

Of the remaining principles, #7, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, is the most important in my opinion. In fact, next to #4, the search for truth, #7 may be the most important principle. It suggests an ontology, an ethic, *and* the basis for a theology. It is a principle about the nature of reality (“the interdependent web of all existence”) and the importance of its preservation (“the need to respect it.”) *All that’s needed to make a religion is the command to worship it!* It is in that sense that principle #7 may prove to be the most important in terms of defining Unitarian Universalism as a religion. And, the principle has its roots in Native American culture and tradition...

Principles #1, #2, and the first half of #3 propose an important basis for morality. *That basis is Kantian*, whether known or acknowledged by the founders of modern Unitarian Universalism. Principle #1 proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This means that people are to be treated as ends,...not as means to an end. This is right out of Kant’s “Critique of Judgment” and his “Metaphysics of Morals,” two of the most important ethical works in 18th century Western

moral thought. The 1st principle exemplifies one of Kant's three statements of his famous Categorical Imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, as never merely a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." The first two UU principles (and the first part of principle #3) ask us to act according to this important moral imperative.

Another of Kant's statements of the Categorical Imperative says: *the will of every rational being, as a universally legislating will, offers encouragement about the future.* What does this mean? It means that we must always look to the future. *We must always have hope.* We must believe, even when we do not or cannot know. As Kant put it, if we are to make sense of life, if we are to "find meaning and direction in life," we must believe and act upon unprovable but necessary propositions *which provide hope for the future.* Kant identified three:...that God exists; that we are free and not determined in our actions; and that our souls are immortal. *O.K.*, I'm not sure that Unitarians want to go quite this far! But, the idea of *hope* is clearly an important element of modern Unitarian Universalism. The source of that hope needs further definition,...but the ideal is there. And, it is important.

It should be noted (again) that principle #3 is a two-part principle: it proclaims not only acceptance of one another, but also *encouragement* to spiritual growth. The implicit idea of the latter is that spiritual growth is required for finding meaning and direction in life. *Well, maybe,...maybe not.* Spirituality is not a necessary condition for finding either meaning or direction in life. One can be spiritual without having direction or finding meaning (e.g., many Existentialists, Camus in particular), and one can have direction and find meaning in life without being spiritual (e.g., most atheists, Bertrand Russell in particular). In short, the connection

between spirituality and meaningfulness cannot just be proclaimed. It requires serious philosophical argument. We make life meaningful through the adoption of values and acting upon them. When values fail us, as they sometimes do, we must replace them, and go on...The point is, spiritual growth is not necessarily a part of that process. Not that it can't be. *It can be*. Not that it shouldn't be. *It probably should be*. But, these claims require serious argument, not just Unitarian Universalist proclamation. And, that argument has not been forthcoming. Instead, modern Unitarian Universalism in practice has lapsed into Mysticism and Relativism in its attempt to define spirituality and its religion... But, I am now *way too close* to doing the critical philosophical analysis that I said I would not be doing today! And,..*dangerously close to destroying any chance for a re-invitation to speak to the Fellowship again!* So, I will turn to principle #6.

Principle #6 also states a moral imperative, but one very different from that captured in principles #1, #2 and #3,...one broader and deeper...*the need to create a world community*. If the search for truth is taken seriously, it will ultimately lead to the necessity of a world community, *a world of universal values and justice*. Kant recognized this connection and theorized about it in his 1795 essay "Perpetual Peace," which became the basis of the *Charter of the United Nations*. I quote from the U.N. preamble, because it incorporates Kant's idea of world peace, but is also a "pure expression" of Unitarian Universalist values as captured in our modern principles: "*We the peoples of the United Nations, determined...to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, ... and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace*

with one another as good neighbors, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security...do hereby resolve...

The idea of world peace so beautifully captured here is also captured in the UU Doxology. “From all that dwell below the skies, *let peace, good will on earth be sung*, in every land, in every tongue.” But, for the record, the UU Doxology isn’t even Unitarian! It comes from Isaac Watts, an 18th century Congregationalist minister! And, also for the record, Watts was not just a minister, but a logician as well! In fact, Isaac Watts holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest title of any logic book ever published,...to wit: “*Logic, or The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences*”! It’s a real page turner!

As stated earlier, principle #4 is the basis for the other six. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning will ultimately determine whether or not the other six principles are legitimate. Principle #4’s place of prominence is reflected in our Unison Affirmation...*which defines what Unitarian Universalism is all about*: “We gather together to seek knowledge and wisdom...in search of truths...which give meaning and direction to our lives.” But, Principle #4 is not unique to Unitarian Universalism either! *It is the mission of every liberal arts college and university in the world!* (I quickly note that it was not the mission of Trump University!) The importance of the 4th principle cannot be overstated. *Without its adoption, there is no basis for Unitarian Universalist values, and without the continuing search for truth...there is no hope for the future...* Those should be your primary takeaways today... While as philosophers we may not

know the truth, we at least know the importance of continuing to seek it! I turn then to principle #7, “*the interdependent web of all existence.*”

I saved this one for last because principle #7 was the last of the UU principles to be adopted, nine years after the original six in 1986. As suggested earlier, principle #7 is the basis for an important tri-fold thesis: one of ontology, ethics, and theology. And, that tri-fold thesis comes directly from Spinoza in the 17th century. It suggests Monism as an ontology, Environmentalism as an ethic, and Pantheism as a theology. O.K., that’s a mouthful. Let me explain! Spinoza’s Monism, so eloquently expressed in his *magnum opus*, the Ethics, proposes that *there is one and only one thing and one and only one kind of thing in the universe.* Spinoza called it *substance*. Substance has properties, but those properties are not themselves *other* things. For example, all objects have dimension. But, dimension is not something different *in kind* from object, because dimension does not exist without object. It is a property of objects. Thus, if there is one and only one thing, and one and only one kind of thing in the universe, it follows that everything must be *one*...part of an “interdependent web of all existence.” There are not “*six* degrees of separation,” as you may have heard, but “*zero*” degrees of separation,...because everything in the universe is inter-connected. *Everything is one!* Ultimately, *substance*, being the only thing that there is,...or every will be,...*must be God!* And, if that’s true, we must both preserve it and worship it. The argument for preserving it is an argument for Environmentalism...a moral argument. *We have a moral obligation to preserve all that there is and will only ever be.* (I know that this makes my friend Dick Smythe very happy! It is a philosophical justification for Environmentalism! And, a moral one at that!) But, the key idea here for theology and religion is that *God is the Universe.* This is known as Pantheism. Might its major philosophical proponent, Baruch Spinoza, the “God

intoxicated Jew of Amsterdam” as he was known, have been the first Unitarian?! What great irony! *A God intoxicated Unitarian!* Spinoza’s view that God is the universe; and therefore must both be preserved and worshipped, is simple, elegant, and deserving of serious consideration ...and, not just by Unitarian Universalists. O.K., to summarize...

The seven UU principles can be categorized into four areas of philosophy. #1, #2, and the first part of #3 provide a set of *moral values* which are Kantian in nature, exemplifying his Categorical Imperative. Principle #6 incorporates an ideal of world peace, a *hope for the future*, which is also Kantian, exemplifying the ideas expressed in Kant’s essay on “Perpetual Peace,” which became part of the U.N. Charter. Principle #7 suggests an ontology, an ethic, and a theology which provide a *philosophical foundation* for modern Unitarian Universalism as a religion. That foundation comes from Spinoza. Principle #4, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the basic principle of epistemology, is the *over-riding value* among all of the UU principles. Adoption of it is required for the development and defense of all the other principles.

You will note that I have not addressed the philosophical basis of principle #5: the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. *Not to worry!* At the “talk back” you will have ample opportunity to express your conscience,...and, in advance of Tuesday’s upcoming election there will be a democratic vote for the best UU principle!

Let me conclude. UU principles aside,...the importance of Unitarian Universalism is in both its encouraging dissent...and providing a safe place for practicing that dissent. This is not unlike the importance of academia, which is also a place of *sanctuary*. In fact, it is interesting to note that

the basis of the concept of academic “*tenure*” is rooted in that of religious “*sanctuary*.” This practice, both encouraging dissent and providing a place for expressing it, is what makes Unitarian Universalism an important religion. *Perhaps the last great hope*...because it provides not a bully pulpit,...but a pulpit for illumination...one for seeking truth...

So, keep the lights on Unitarian Universalists! And, change the bulbs when they go out...as soon as you find out how many UU’s it takes!

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Fellowship today...

TMG