

Transcendence, Survival, and UU Religion in the 21st Century

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The ultimate challenge facing humanity is whether we can widen and deepen our consciousness to fill the vacuum created by the fantastic increase of our technological power. It seems to me that... is the issue on which our survival hinges.¹

I. Introduction

Einstein observed that, since the invention of nuclear weapons, everything has changed but our thinking. Science has developed extraordinary weapons of mass destruction for us, and they are sufficiently powerful to obliterate or at least cripple all life on earth. These massively destructive weapons now are proliferating around the world. It is painfully clear that humanity must learn to live with a substantial degree of universal cooperation rather than in violent competition. If we fail to achieve world-wide harmony, our future on earth is problematic.

A major obstacle to achieving this essential change in patterns of human life lies within ourselves. Ethnocentrism is a habit of thought that generates conflict at all levels of human interaction. A survey of history reveals that it always has.

Ethnocentrism. It's an ungainly term, and relatively recent in origin: coined early in the 20th century by an American social scientist, William Graham Sumner. It is, he said, a nearly universal delusion in humans: this "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders." Ethnocentrism is the deep-seated conviction in humans that their own nation, race, religion, or group, their world view is superior to all others, and that there can be only one true world view, namely their own. It is evident now that our species must transcend this delusion if human life is to survive and flourish.²

II. Imaginative Religion and Rational Religion

The mind, with all its flaws, is surely our major asset in the struggle for survival. The mind is complex, obliged by its nature to process an enormous volume of data. Early on it must have experienced a pressing need to provide some kind of manageable order to its voluminous contents, some way of enabling it to deal with the steady inflow of stimuli from the world outside as well as from the world within.

Humans have a profound need for meaning. We need it in much the same way we need water, food, and sleep. We can now see that the meaning of life is not something we find in a book, stated concisely. It is not something we discover in one place. Nobody can tell us what the meaning of our life is. It is something we create, in large part; and it is also something that happens to us. Partly voluntary, partly involuntary. Objective in part, subjective in part. The order, the meaning we see in the nature of things is not arbitrarily created by us; nor is it imposed upon us. It emerges out of the encounter between the world and ourselves. It is rooted in facts, but meaning involves both facts and feelings.

We derive a great deal of meaning from the pattern of personal relations in which we are involved, and much of this is tacit. We would find it hard to express this meaning in concise phrases. The fact that we live in a home with one, two, three other persons, some adult, and some children, generates currents of meaning in our lives. Our being part of a particular community (neighbors, shopkeepers, acquaintances) also is a source of meaning. The causes and institutions to which we commit ourselves are consequential: clubs, community organizations, an action group, a study group, a church, a temple, a union, a professional association—these generate meaning.

In addition, meaning is created in us by our striving toward the life goals we absorbed from our society: the pursuit of recognition, prestige, status, achievement, power, and wealth. Indeed, this is a major source of meaning for most Americans. The work they do looms large in their lives. The pursuit of pleasure is another source. The enjoyment of art, music, literature, drama, dance, and athletics—all contribute to the meaning we experience in life.

Meaning arises out of the symbolic, linguistic, institutional, and experiential components which, interacting with our being, give form and direction to our existence, to our thoughts, feelings, and actions. When we set out in search of meaning, it is not an objective, scientific, analytical, verbal statement that we require. What we need is a perception, a vision, an image of life that will unify mind and heart, understanding and experience, our faculties and our feelings, and that will link us to the world with our whole being. It is above all subjective meaning that we require, not only objective knowledge.

This need was initially met in our species by the highly creative use of stories or myths. This was an extraordinarily successful invention which provided humans not only with an order for the contents of the mind but also for the emotions, in addition to providing a substantial degree of social and moral order. Making use of this wonderfully fertile invention, humans in separate cultural groupings developed different but parallel worldviews to serve as a life-orientation; and this made possible a far more cooperative level of human existence.

This creative-imaginative way of organizing human experience has been and continues now to serve millions of humans around the world as at least part of, if not as a complete orientation in life. Since it brings order to mind, feelings, and behavior alike, it has enormous value. It's a major contribution to the survival of the species.

However, like all human inventions, it is imperfect. Since these creative worldviews had survival value, since they were in effect a matter of life or death, humans everywhere experienced an intense attachment to their own system of story-myths. They became passionately convinced of the ultimate validity of their group's settled worldview. The result is what has come to be called "ethnocentrism:" the inherent conviction that my worldview is the ultimate. All others tend to be experienced as odd, alien, and even barbaric. It is an almost universal delusion in members of our species, a pathological dynamic rooted in the socially defined self. We now know that each self develops out of interaction with the social order into which it is born.

There is a similar delusional component that accompanies the rational worldview; and although it too has proved to be a remarkable creation, enabling us to vastly increase our understanding of the natural world, it too is tragically flawed. More about this shortly.

The rational approach, developed in ancient Greece, proved to be an alternative method of creating order in the mind. The Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim traditions, all three, emerged out of the earlier story-myth, creative-imaginative approach to understanding.

After the Greek monarch, Alexander the Great, conquered Persia in the late 4th century BCE, Greek colonies spread throughout the Mediterranean area and the Near East, and they carried with them the then newly developed rational worldview, along with the traditional Greek story-myths. Of the three major religious traditions, the Hebrew was the first to encounter the

rational worldview, and when it did so a minority of its people were enthusiastic about its promise. This minority set about reconciling these conflicting ways of bringing order and understanding to the fertile human mind.³

The Muslim tradition went through a similar pattern of development, with similar results, starting in the 8th century AD. Again, only a minority found the rational worldview exciting; and both Jews and Muslims later concluded that the two disparate worldviews were not reconcilable, that the rational worldview was of little use in achieving a relationship with God.⁴

In the 20th century, the striking success of science and technology in dealing with the material world has caused a great many people, UUs among them, to reject the creative-imaginative worldview, to regard it as primitive. This has led on one hand to the decline of mainline Protestantism, and, on the other hand, to a substantial expansion of Fundamentalism in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions alike. Fundamentalism is dedicated to holding on to the long held story-myth worldview.

We should be aware, however, that while both the imaginative and the rational-scientific modes of understanding the world have considerable merit, both are also seriously flawed, as we shall see.

However, because science is highly effective at enabling humans to understand and exert some control over the physical world, it tends to generate an almost sublime confidence in its ultimate validity in an influential minority. The result is a pattern of ethnocentrism in this minority with regard to science very similar to that persistently linked to enthusiasts for fundamentalist worldviews. Science has come to be seen by many educated people as the only valid worldview. As Loren Eiseley put it: "Ever so many people in the contemporary world have replaced authoritarian religion with authoritarian science. These people adhere to a dogma as rigidly as do those of fanatical religiosity."⁵

Which is to say that science serves the function of a religion for many people, though it does not deal with the central religious issues of purpose and meaning. Human nature is such that it requires a pattern of life-meaning, and this must emerge out of the whole being of each individual, not the intellect alone. The development of a worldview, a religion, in each individual is an intensely intimate, subjective process.

Science has achieved its success by deliberately excluding subjectivity from its concerns (as far as possible). This is a major source of science's strength; it is at the same time its greatest limitation as a worldview for the general population. Objectively, science is a human triumph; subjectively it is empty of meaning. Humans have a pressing need for meaning, but science does not and cannot provide it.

While science has developed invaluable insight into the nature of the physical world, it has also produced, in its dedicated and successful quest for objective understanding, a series of disastrous byproducts: worldwide environmental pollution, nuclear weapons, and overpopulation, as well as a grave erosion of essential life-meaning. As Einstein noted, science does not render a sense of ultimate and fundamental values; this is the function religion must serve in human life.⁶

He went on to add, "by painful experience we have learned that rational thinking does not suffice to solve the problems of social life. Penetrating research and keen scientific work have often had tragic implications for humankind, producing, on one hand, inventions which liberated us from exhausting physical labor, making life easier and richer; but, on the other hand, introducing a grave restlessness into our lives, making us slaves to our technological environment, and—most catastrophic of all—creating the means of our own mass destruction... A tragedy of overwhelming poignancy."⁷

The imaginative world view, on the other hand, in addition to fostering passionate ethnocentrism in its adherents, also led to persisting and widespread abuse of non-believers, to phenomena like the witchcraft hysteria that plagued Europe and the American colonies in the 15th and 16th centuries. A major flaw in a traditional worldview is that it conditions its people consistently to mistake belief for knowledge.

Throughout their lives, all humans seek an understanding of the world that enables them to find their way in it, to feel at home in the cosmos; and that, at the same time, satisfies their deep, subjective need for life-meaning. We all of us, uniquely, subjectively, sort through our knowledge and experience then settle subjectively, often tentatively, on conclusions that empower us with the courage to be, that generate life—energy and direction.

Each of us arrives at a subjective worldview that is intimately convincing to ourselves. But is it conceivable there is a worldview that would prove to be subjectively effective for every unique individual in the world? The idea is absurd.

It is becoming evident to a substantial minority of humans that we must set about the task of transcending the limitations of both the imaginative and the rational modes of understanding, both of which contain delusory components. If we fail in this endeavor, our future is surely uncertain at best.

III. Transcendence and the Social Self

If our movement is to make a significant contribution to the required cultural mutation of our species, we must embrace transcendence as a major goal of UU religion in the 21st century. This transcendence has two dimensions, one broad and one specific.

The broad dimension is concerned with the origin of the human self—the socially created self. Every society, through the process of socialization, creates an individual self in each of its members as they grow up, working through the agency of the family, of peers, schools, and subcultures. This is how individuals everywhere are made.⁸

However, like every other human creation, the worldview socialized into these developing selves is imperfect. It inevitably contains a number of misconceptions and distortions of reality, which are then retransmitted by socialization from generation to generation. This would not be much of a problem if people were aware of the fact that the conceptions they confidently assume to be accurate images of the real world, are often only inherited misconceptions and prejudices. People are rarely aware of this highly significant circumstance in their lives. Their social conditioning frequently fails to relate them to the real world, and instead often separates them from reality and from each other.

Consider a few of the destructive misconceptions that have now become evident to many of us. (Who knows how many other distortions of reality there are of which we are not yet aware.) First of all, in many of the world's societies, including our own, women were for centuries assumed to be inferior to men, and therefore should be excluded from any responsible positions in the social order. The Bible itself made this clear. It was so clear indeed that even most women believed it, as they too were formed by their socialization.

The situation for homosexuals is similar. The word of God made clear (along with a number of other regrettable misconceptions) that homosexuality was an abomination, was a revolting perversion of the will of God. One of the major life tasks for homosexuals has been, and is still, transcending this socially constructed image of themselves.

In Europe and the U.S., millions of people for centuries absorbed the conviction from their people that Jews were devious and evil, not like the rest of us, and this misconception was transmitted down the ages through socialization. The result has been recurring agony for the Jewish people, suffering and death on a massive scale.

All of which is to say, that while a human individual can only be created by social conditioning, the selves that emerge in this way often contain destructive, demonic elements. So much so that a major life goal for a significant minority in many religious traditions has been self-transcendence: that is, transcendence of the self conditioned into us as we grew up in our society.

Transcendence of the socially defined self is already a tacit aim of UU religion. The UU Principle which asserts that we affirm and intend to promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” is a conscious expression of this underlying aim. We must as a movement become increasingly aware of the fact that this points to the direction of our spiritual growth in the 21st century—transcendence of the socially defined self. We now know that individuals who feel at home in our movement do so because they share with other members a distinct pattern of values that is remarkably uniform among us, and that is different from the value patterns in any other church’s members, as well as from those with no church connection at all. Those drawn to our religion are those whose tacit values resonate with the tacit call to transcendence.⁹

This is the broad dimension of transcendence as a major aim for UU religion. The specific dimension is concerned with transcending the ethnocentrism that is a pervasive and persisting blight on human life all over the world, a demonic component in the socially defined self. Members of our own churches are not immune to this ethnocentric delusion: many of them, clearly, are firmly convinced their religion is superior to all others. UUs must devote much of their energy and attention in the 21st century to achieving transcendence, and in addition doing all they can to raise the consciousness of more and more people about the issue.

IV. Cultural Mutation: The Religion of Compassion

The Hebrew prophets of the Axial Age (800-200 BCE) spoke out for a radically new conception of God—a cultural mutation. They passionately urged their people to transcend the old tribal God who demanded regular ritual and animal sacrifice. They vigorously asserted that God wanted, not elaborate temple rituals, not the burning of beasts but compassion and caring toward others. Micah put it like this:

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?... He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”¹⁰

The prophets were initiating a cultural mutation to a religion of compassion, and this pattern developed also in the Buddhist, Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim traditions alike. A major factor inhibiting the spread of this mutation has been and is today the persistence of ethnocentrism and the subjective certainty that accompanies it. It has consistently generated violent conflict between one religion and all others, between nations, between cultures and subcultures. This deeply rooted cultural delusion can and must be transcended by our species. It is a formidable barrier to the achievement of a universal culture of compassion.

Compassion is one of the various forms of love. It is rich in its implications, containing elements of caring, empathy, sympathy, kindness, mercy, and tenderness. Indifference and mercilessness are its opposites. A compassionate person is one who is moved to help others who are suffering, whether from deprivation, oppression, or persecution, to help whether or not the sufferers are members of one's own group. Compassion transcends ethnocentrism. UUs must do all they can to promote the growth of a religion of compassion, and indeed this intention is expressed plainly in the UU Principles and Purposes—"justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

This is not to say that UU religion is therefore superior to all others. It is delusory to conclude that it is. Ours is a specialized form of religion, devoted more to evolving understanding than to settled truth; more devoted to change than to stability and order. However, stability and order are surely at least as important to any society as change. Both traditional and progressive religion matter to humanity; both are essential to any living culture. Both are valid, both effective in their own ways. Both are functional, useful, and even essential to humanity.

UUs must begin now to shake off the ethnocentric conviction that their religion is the ultimate, that all others are inferior. People in our movement display easily observable evidence in their words and actions that many of them regard imaginative, traditional, myth-centered religion as pre-rational and therefore beneath the notice of any right-thinking individual here in the modern world. Any religion that does not make sense rationally is, for many UUs, unquestionably inferior.

However, it is also a plainly observable fact that the vast majority of people all over the world find imaginative religion preferable to purely rational religion. Enthusiasts for a largely rational religion are a tiny minority, and have been so ever since the 4th century BCE when that worldview began to develop. This has been true in the Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim traditions alike. Surely we must conclude that, while the rational worldview is infinitely preferable to the imaginative worldview for understanding the material world, it is plainly inadequate for the vast majority of humans in creating a life-sustaining pattern of subjective meaning.¹¹

In actual practice currently, it seems clear that millions of people around the world who find meaning and direction in their lives blend both the imaginative and the rational worldviews, the mix varying from person to person. This may well be inevitable, a lasting characteristic of humanity.

Each person's worldview is an intimately subjective matter, rooted in mind, body, and emotions, in the conscious mind and in the unconscious, in both thought and feeling, in preference and passion. People in any time settle on the worldview that, deep within them, orients them to the world they find around them at any given point in history, at any given point in their personal lives. They put together an orientation that empowers them for living, given their unique nature and the cultural circumstances in which they find themselves.

Once we transcend our ethnocentric bias, we can see that this is a humane, creative, and functional arrangement. Given the range of individual differences in humans, given the complexity of the variables involved, this is how it has to be. The conditions of life are now such that we must rise above the old, deep-rooted assumption that there can be only one valid worldview, namely, our own. We must stop dismissing beliefs and worldviews other than our own as inferior. The worldview, the religion each of us holds is indeed superior—but only for ourselves—not for everybody.

UU Principles assert that we affirm and intend to promote (among other things) "acceptance of each other in our congregations." We must learn to apply this life-giving principle, not only to people in our own congregations, but to all others as well. We must not ridicule the belief systems of others, must not struggle to impress them with how wrong they are.

We may, of course, share with them how we see the world, not with the aim of converting them to our views, but simply to share our own understanding with them. They may well, in their turn, be moved to ridicule what they see as our peculiar perspective on the nature of things. They may be so moved because this is still (regrettably) a widespread practice among humans.

We may let them know that we do not see the world as they do, but we must take this step without hostility, rejection, or disdain. We must not judge and reject others for their religion, their way of understanding the world and themselves set down in it. We must do all we can to transcend the ethnocentrism that has consistently plagued humankind.

Judgment must not be directed at the belief systems, but rather at the behavior of individuals and the groups of which they are members. How do they behave toward people outside their own group? Do they seek domination of society in order to impose their beliefs on others, as is true of militant fundamentalists, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish? Is their behavior creative or destructive? Is it caring or arrogant? The key test of any religious orientation is whether or not it results in caring and compassionate relations with other humans. Compassion is the key. Never mind what individuals say. What do they do? How do they actually relate to others and the world?

V.Science, Subjectivity, and Unitarian Universalism

Ethnocentrism plagues human life everywhere. Unitarian Universalists are not immune. Scientists are not immune. It is an easily observable fact that many UUs hold a conviction that their religion is without doubt superior to all others. Many scientists give clear evidence of being gripped by a certainty that their worldview is unquestionably the only valid one; and this conclusion is shared by a great many UUs as well. Once we transcend the ethnocentric delusion that only one worldview can be valid, it becomes apparent that this conviction is endlessly destructive, is irrational, immoral, and inhumane.

Ethnocentrism is fully as regrettable in UUs and in scientists as it is in Fundamentalists, and as damaging to social harmony. The fact is, your religion is not superior to all others and neither is mine. We each of us find our way as best we can, find our way to a religion, a worldview that empowers us for life, renders for us personally, inwardly, a life-giving pattern of meaning and purpose.

When UUs come to accept in the depths of themselves that, though they may find their own religion to be subjectively satisfying, it plainly does not meet the needs of most people. The development of a life-giving world-view is an intimate, complex subjective process, unique in each individual. UUs must come to accept the fact that an almost infinite variety of religions can be successful for individuals in providing them with a subjectively effective orientation in life, given their unique genetic heritage, environmental influences, historical circumstances, their current state of development.

The traditional, imaginative religions of story-myth are largely subjective in nature, and this is precisely their major strength, their value for survival. They have been and continue to be an extraordinary asset to humanity past and present. They enabled our species early on to find its way forward into life. They empower humans with life energy. Huston Smith put it like this: "authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos can pour into human existence."¹²

Each individual is, of course, subjectively unique. Each has a unique need for a pattern of meaning, both spoken and unspoken, one that will enable them to deal with the problems, pressures, and puzzles of everyday life. The worldview, the religion that meets this essential need

for humans, adapts each individual to the changing conditions of life in the world, the changing conditions within the self. Each individual must be subjectively free to develop the sources of meaning that make life possible.

Our ethnocentricity leads us to conclude that there is only one valid worldview. But it is absurd to think that a single worldview could meet the needs of millions of unique individuals. It's a fantasy, a delusion, one which we use to enhance our own feelings of security in the cosmos, to assure ourselves of the ultimate validity of the worldview that guides us. Each individual is subjectively unique. It follows that consequential religion, transformative religion must take form in the crucible of each individual human being, in order to inspire a life-giving spirit in each.

UUs and humanity as a whole must transcend ethnocentrism. It is not criminals, murderers, delinquents, gang members, and non-conformists who, down through history, have generated large scale killing and destruction. Rather, it is the dutiful, moral, virtuous, conforming citizens, (organized into armed forces, acting in the name of what they have been conditioned to regard as a righteous cause) who have produced violence, destruction, and killing on a massive scale. Crimes motivated by personal, selfish motives have been negligible in their impact compared to those initiated by ethnocentrically energized social movements. Our species must exorcise this curse. We must transcend ethnocentrism.

VI. Conclusion

What can be said in summary? First of all, that a major, explicit goal for UU religion in the 21st century must be self-transcendence: that is, transcendence of the tragic misconceptions lodged in our socially created selves; and chief among these is the demonic, delusional component of ethnocentrism each socialized self contains.

UUs must begin this process by transcending their own ethnocentric bias, the widely held conviction that "my religion is superior to all others." This is a delusion that separates us both from other people and from reality.

We must transcend the assumption that there can be only one valid worldview, but rather come to accept that all individuals must find their way to a subjectively creative pattern of understanding. Each person's effective worldview is a subjective matter, and one that serves to generate in each the courage to be fully alive.

We must come to see that both imaginative and rational religion have been of immense value to our species, that they continue to be so here in the present; but at the same time these disparate worldviews have grave flaws as well, which must be transcended. Both have flaws that threaten our survival.

Ethnocentrism is not inevitable. It can be transcended. Even though it is rooted in our profound need for subjectively secure meaning, even so, the powers of the self-system afford us the freedom to rise above our given socially conditioned characteristics. Nowhere is this more apparent than in warfare, in which thousands of people are conditioned by their societies to transcend the powerful, biological drive for survival, to put their lives at risk in the service of their society, to kill and die for honor and glory.

We are not rigidly bound to our current characteristics. Humans also are demonstrably capable of relating to others with caring and compassion, of fostering in themselves a concern for universal well-being: as exemplified, for example, in the aspirations expressed in the UU Principles. Humans also are capable of self-criticism, of escaping egocentric and ethnocentric biases.

We must focus on the task of transcendence here in the 21st century, for the salvation of both our species and ourselves. We will not, of course, be alone in this effort. We are already working in concert with millions of others around the world. The necessary awareness will spread widely among the people of the world through the work of writers, poets, journalists, dramatists, filmmakers, philosophers, teachers, religious leaders, as well as you and me.

Where shall we begin? What initial steps can we take? We must begin with ourselves. We must intentionally, persistently, with dedicated commitment set about spreading among UUs an awareness that “your religion is not superior to all others—and neither is mine.” How can we manage this? First, by keeping the insight alive in our people.

Workshops for ministers can be organized in chapter meetings all over the continent aimed at enhancing members’ awareness of the value and urgency of transcendence; and the ministers can contribute to spreading this awareness in congregations through preaching, meditations, workshops, and newsletter articles. The *UU World* and *UU Voice* can reach out to their readers. Banners and posters to hang in our churches and parish halls can be created that will help keep the insight alive in our people.

Once UUs have worked through the issue, have begun to transcend their own ethnocentrism, we can undertake a continent-wide movement to promote this life-giving cultural mutation. A simple place to begin is with Wayside Pulpit displays that express the insight. We can rent billboard space for the same purpose, can develop radio and TV spot announcements. We can organize public discussions of the issue; can promote dialogue on ethnocentrism, on transcendence, in ecumenical groups. Writers will develop articles and books on the subject. UUs all over the country can make use of letters to the editor to set people’s thoughts moving toward the essential awareness.

This is an avenue of social concern that could profoundly transform human life, if we commit ourselves to the goal of transcendence in others and ourselves.

¹ May, Rollo, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1967), 37.

² Sumner, William Graham, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1940), 13.

³ Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 170ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Easley, Loren, *The Man Who Saw Through Time: Francis Bacon and the Modern Dilemma* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1962), 104-105.

⁶ Einstein, Albert, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), 42-49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸ Berger, Peter and Luckman, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 129ff.

⁹ Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, *Engaging Our Diversity*, (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), 52, 61.

¹⁰ Micah 6:6-8.

¹¹ Armstrong, 170ff.

¹² Smith, Huston, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Mentor Book, 1961), 20.