

Shriveled Beneath the Clods: The Use and Misuse of the Principles and Purposes Statement 1985–2007

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*Faith is not delivered to us in a package of words; it is a grace
overwhelming.*

—Wallace W. Robbins

We cannot be religious in general.

—George Santayana

[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.”

—Matt. 13:3–9

Introduction

My assignment is to write about “The Use and Misuse of the Principles and Purposes Statement 1985–2007.” In common usage in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the “Principles and Purposes Statement” typically refers to the seven principles and the sources outlined in Article II of the bylaws of the UUA. The “statement” is printed in the front of the current hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, as well as framed and posted on the walls of many of the member congregations (mine excluded) and on wallet cards given out by many, if not all, Unitarian Universalist congregations. A more formal definition would be the entire text of Article II in the UUA bylaws. I have chosen to use the former definition as the focus of this paper. Hereafter this paper refers to the seven principles of the UUA as “the Principles,” and the many sources will be referred to as “the Sources.” When referring to the entire Principles and Purposes Statement it uses “the Statement” and referring to the Unitarian Universalist Association it uses either “the UUA” or “the Association” interchangeably.

What Are the Principles?

In the gospels Jesus avoids self-definition by asking, “Who do *they* say I am?” In doing so, the great leader allowed others to characterize him, rather than defining himself. In his day this led some people to think he was the messiah, others to think he was the Son of God, some thought of him as a political threat, and others considered him a loose cannon. In a similar way, the UUA Principles are characterized by various

people in a variety of disparate ways. Depending on one's relationship to the Principles, they are glorified by some as almost salvific, while at the same time they are derided by others as a troubling nuisance best dealt with through extermination. The Principles have been defined by different people as being essentially: an article of bylaws, a covenant, a creed, a mission or vision statement, scripture, a theology, the permanent (as opposed to the transient) of UU faith, or as the minimum that binds Unitarian Universalists together. The following few sections explore the various identities given to and claims made about the Principles.

Bylaws?

The Principles are, in fact, an article of the UUA bylaws. If "an article of the bylaws" were all they were, however, there would probably be little controversy over them today. As a general statement of description in a legal document, they serve to define the association of congregations loosely enough to include all of the current communities, while also providing just enough delineation to keep neo-Nazis and other fascist, authoritarian and fundamentalist organizations out.

On the other hand, a later section, Section C-2.4, Freedom of Belief, states: "Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test." Section C-2.4, sometimes referred to as the "Liberty Clause," seems to negate any clarity of definition or delineation that had previously been created by the Principles (except for being non-creedal). According to the 1997 Commission on Appraisal (COA) report: "[Section C-2.4] is loaded with strongly stated principles, some of which are in tension (and potentially in conflict) with other constitutional provisions."

Such a radically anti-institutional principle as this "liberty clause" implies that whatever else is said in the Bylaws, the individual member has priority over the whole body.... This statement also implies that congregations—at least in formal affirmations—are independent of the constitutional authority of the UUA; no congregation is required to adopt the UUA Principles even though they have covenanted to "affirm and support" them. One exception to this assertion of congregational autonomy is stipulated, namely, the use of a congregational statement as a creedal test; in other words, the individual is a higher authority than the congregation.... What we see here is a system that involves several mutual limitations placed on the individual, the congregation, and the Association. Although the system seems to be full of inner contradictions, in practice, apparently, it works. (*Interdependence*, Sec. 4)

The report goes on to say, "The Bylaws reveal a deeply ambivalent attitude toward our congregational heritage" (*Interdependence*, Sec. 4). One can conclude that while the Principles are a section of the UUA's bylaws, these bylaws are in some fundamental ways "deeply ambivalent" and in other ways "full of inner contradictions."

If they are contradictory and ambivalent in other ways, they are clear in calling on all congregations in association with the UUA to take action to “affirm and promote” them. Therefore, in practice the Principles are more than a mere written, legal definition. The Principles are meant to influence the identity and functioning of congregations.

Covenant?

According to the COA, “covenant” as a term “had not been used in any official [UUA] document until the adoption of the UUA Principles statement in 1985” (*Interdependence*, Sec. 4). The Principles state, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” and therefore the Principles are presumably a covenant. A covenant, in this case, is a written promise and agreement presumably binding more than 1,000 member congregations to these common purposes and principles. The introduction to *Interdependence* states, “The Principles of the UUA Bylaws begin by saying ‘we covenant’ but they do not speak of the covenanting congregations as corporate bodies.” The report goes on to say:

In some cases it is unclear whether the seven Principles are addressed to congregations or to individuals. For example, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” could be directed to either. This ambiguity is characteristic of contemporary Unitarian Universalism and raises a question: Is our Association congregationally or individually constituted? (*Interdependence*, Sec. 4)

Since the nature of covenant is mutual agreement, it is essential that all of the parties involved know who they themselves represent when making a promise, and know with whom they are promising. Since, after serious reflection and study, the COA still found the covenantal aspects of the Principles confusing and ill-defined, one has to question the Principles’ efficacy as a covenant.

Tainted as they may be with ambiguity, the covenantal nature of the Principles has ushered in a shift in emphasis in UUism, from broad autonomy to greater communal identity. Or as the COA concluded, they have helped move UUs “...from independence to interdependence, from individualism to relationalism” (*Interdependence*, Conclusion).

Nine years after *Interdependence*, a different Commission on Appraisal published *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, which optimistically concluded:

The process and language of the Principles and Purposes represented a huge, historic shift from emphasis on independent belief toward corporate covenants. The complete text of the final document includes but also transcends our predisposition toward radical autonomy, thus enabling us to forge a more cohesive religious presence—what our post–World War I Unitarian and Universalist forbearers, John Haynes Holmes and Clarence Russell Skinner, each described as the quest for the “Beloved Community.” (*Engaging*, 127)

The Principles' explicit reference to covenant signifies a promise. Promises by nature require relationship. As a public proclamation the Principles have served to propel UUs from postures of privately held beliefs into communally defined commitments. They also make clear that our churches serve larger realities and objectives than those of their individual members. Since covenants are formed by mutual consent, it can be argued that the Principles are a covenant to the degree that the Principles are actually accepted by congregations and individual UUs as a covenant to which they give their consent.

However, the covenantal quality of the Principles is further weakened by the "Liberty Clause" (Section C-2.4) which in fact turns the promise into a suggestion. In so doing, the covenant apparently accepts people into it who do not necessarily agree to it. This contradiction seems to fly in the face of the entire notion of covenant. One can conclude that the Principles are covenantal in spirit, but are not in essence an actual religious covenant that binds Unitarian Universalists together.

Creed?

Some have argued that the Principles have exceeded the qualities of a covenant and have become a creed. Creeds typically refer to "official doctrinal formulations that are binding upon members of particular religious organizations" (Gilbert, ix). From a technical standpoint, the "Liberty Clause," discussed above, seems to alleviate any legalistic concern that the Principles are in fact a creed.

Nevertheless, there is a valid argument to be made that the Principles are used like a creed in some circumstances. One can imagine that a person who does not respect "the inherent worth and dignity" of gays or women or Jews or "...of all people" would have a hard time finding freedom to openly share such beliefs and remain honored members of a UU congregation. As one colleague said, "...creeds exist in order to denounce, to declare anathema upon those who do not agree with those who subscribe. Literally, if you do not agree with us, go to Hell" (Robbins, 161). Indeed, disagreeing too strongly with the first Principle can spark such a reaction. In the same vein, if a person does not accept the claim that all are a part of "the interdependent web of all existence," that person might find it disingenuous to affirm and/or promote the Principles.

Scripture?

One frustrated young participant in the COA review of the Principles at the 2007 General Assembly said, "I don't think, like most of you, that the Principles are the world's longest and least memorable mission statement. I consider them the world's shortest and most unforgettable scripture. As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, they are my scripture." It makes one wonder how many UUs revere and venerate the Principles as scriptural for them. Scripture typically refers to the sacred text of a religious community and one with the highest level of religious authority. When one reviews the way the Principles were developed and the role of scripture in religion (as I do later), it becomes clear that the Principles do not warrant the designation of scripture.

Mission Statement?

One could certainly argue that there is a mission statement, if not missionary, quality to the Principles. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines a mission as: "a ministry commissioned by a religious organization to propagate its faith." Indeed, the agreement to "promote" the Principles calls UUs to evangelize on behalf of the values they contain. The Principles express some of the core values of the UUA, as a mission statement of an organization often does. However, the Purpose section of the Statement expresses the mission of the UUA through phrases like "The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of member congregations... and implement its principles." The Principles support the mission of the Association by articulating some of the institutions' core values, but the Principles are not in themselves a mission statement.

Vision?

There is also a vision statement quality to some of the Principles in that they include aspirations such as "the goal of world community." And yet, the Principles also include truth claims (some might say dogma), and definitive assertions like "the inherent worth and dignity of all people...and...the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The Principles are a tangled yet coherent combination of aspirations and truth claims.

Theology?

The most recent Commission on Appraisal claimed, "One of the prominent places where UU theology is made manifest is in the Principles and Purposes..." (*Engaging*, 126). Yet Richard Gilbert describes the Principles as:

...the broad canvas on which Unitarian Universalists paint their particular religious philosophies. However, these principles do not constitute a single theological position, nor do they form a credo. They are the prerequisites for creating a credo—necessary, but not sufficient for building one's own theology....It is not enough to affirm [the Principles]; they do not constitute specific beliefs about the nature of reality, humanity, morality, human meaning, and destiny. While we embrace the seven Unitarian Universalist principles consensually, their use takes us to different places on the theological spectrum (Gilbert vii, xii).

What Gilbert makes clear is that the Principles themselves do not constitute a theology or even a theological position. To the degree that the Principles do constitute a theological position, Carl Scovel has argued that they reflect an "implicit Humanist consensus." Davidson Loehr equates them completely with American liberal, social, and political values and finds them devoid of religious and theological substance.

One explanation for why this set of Principles which were developed in the 1980s have little theological substance and language is offered by the COA, which wrote in

1997 that "...we [Unitarian Universalists] have only recently begun to regain a theological voice and vocabulary" (*Interdependence*, Introduction). If their assessment is accurate, then it not only helps explain why the Principles are so shy of theological content, but also why many UUs do not realize that fact. The commission goes on to assert that "[the] Principles are stated as moral ideals, reflecting our very cautious approach to theological affirmations, at least in terms of 'we-language'" (*Interdependence*, Sec. 4). The Principles are not a theology.

Least Common Denominator?

One of the reasons the Association is so cautious about asserting theological affirmations is that UUism is a pluralistic faith that contains within it people and congregations with a variety of theologies and some who appear ignorant of or disregarding of theology altogether. The growing pluralism in the Association since the mid-nineteenth century has made it increasingly difficult to describe what has become a shrinking common denominator among its members. It has been said that "the basis of unity in Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships is not shared beliefs, but a common quest and the affirmation of the values necessary to its furtherance" (Shaw, 134).

Indeed, the Principles were originally intended to be an articulation of the minimum that binds Unitarian Universalists together, and only later did they become understood as so much more.

In practice the Principles have emerged as a symbol of unity. The irony is that they were intended primarily as a statement of *broad inclusiveness*; that is, of a wide and even all-embracing diversity appropriate to the bylaws of a religiously heterodox movement but theologically neutral to the greatest extent possible....In the words of the Committee chair, Walter Royal Jones Jr., "We really wanted to assure everyone that no point of view was going to be left out. We wanted to say to everyone, 'You belong.'" (*Engaging*, 139)

As an affirmation of the least that UUs hold in common, across the theological and philosophical spectrum, the Principles do a fair, if rather uninspiring, job. By their nature they are an exercise in pragmatic reductionism. Furthermore, they are imbued with the unimpassioned tenor of an article of bylaws.

What Are They?

According to the above analysis, the Principles are essentially a section of bylaws that express the least common denominator that connects UUs together in association. They are not an effective or binding covenant; they are not a creed, a credo, a scripture or a theology. In other words, the Principles are widely misunderstood and misused, and their purpose and limitations are generally ill-defined.

Formation and Authority

While the scope of this paper is the Principles post-1985, a review of some of the details of their formation is necessary to critique the level of authority that is often afforded to them. It will also serve to better demonstrate the origins of some of the inherent limitations for the purposes for which the Principles are often employed.

Edward Frost writes:

In the 1970s feminists and the others believed that the UUA Principles and Purposes “still reflected patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions...the term ‘brotherhood’ is an example.”...“The theological language of the 1961 statement was also coming under increased criticism.” Not everyone believed that the “...great universal truths of the world’s religions could be summed up in the Judeo-Christian tradition.” (Frost, 9–10).

At that time, the use of the word “God” was widely debated and due to its historic usage and etymology in the English language the word itself was no longer considered by many to effectively represent their understanding of ultimate reality. The dispute around whether to include or exclude the word “God” from the Principles and Purposes Statement was among the most divisive issues. One newspaper headline at that time said something to the effect of “Unitarian Universalists Debate Removing God from Their Religion.”

In an epistle sent to UUs around the continent prior to the vote at General Assembly, the Rev. Carl Scovel opined,

I believe that we have tried to build a denomination on an implicit humanist consensus...[There seems to be an] implicit desire to become that Association in which only humanists will truly feel at home....We find fewer and fewer references to any kind of transcendent reality in our denominational materials...that transcendent reality in which, I believe, we live and move and have our being (Scovel, 130–31).

The strong Humanist and feminist critique offered at the time helped sharpen UUs’ understanding of religion and language and provided the Association with many lasting gifts. However, it also contributed to what has become an official articulation of UUism’s living tradition (the Principles and Purposes Statement) that fails to adequately capture the central theological and historical dimensions of the faith and tradition.

It is important to recognize how the process that led to the current Statement produced what now exists. The Statement was born out of a process that is meant to be a representative democracy among North American Unitarian Universalists. Without going into an entire critique of the General Assembly (GA) format, I will offer some considerations for why that format is inadequate for determining a definitive statement on behalf of Unitarian Universalism.

In an article critiquing the UU GA Resolution process, Rev. Barbara Merritt wrote:

There is an important place in human society for democratic process, majority rule and political lobbying, but not in matters of conscience, not in

matters of faith, not in determining what is true and false, right and wrong (Merritt, 1).

Even if one believes that a democratic process is a valid way to determine matters of faith, the GA process used by the UUA to make governing and other decisions on behalf of the Association is a deeply flawed form of democracy. Hundreds of member congregations do not send delegates to the GA, and among the congregations that do send delegates, the process by which their delegates are elected is typically not very representational.

...in most congregations most of the time, “election” of these “delegates” is strictly *pro forma*. Most members either don’t know about or don’t care about these “delegate” elections; so we just rubber stamp as our “choice” whoever happens to have the time or interest or money to go. And this is how we have got, in practice, a phony democracy (6 Wesley 9).

Moreover, the discussion process in the congregations that led up to the determination of the Principles has been equated with the taking of a political poll.

...instead of asking religious questions about what was worth believing, what was necessary to believe, what beliefs might best be used to fashion people of good character, and so on—instead of this, the Unitarians [*sic*] simply took an extended poll. They asked a handful of churches—including the first church I served—to hold discussion groups, to discover what the people who attended there (and liked discussion groups) happened to believe. What such a poll had to, and did, reveal were the generic cultural beliefs these people brought into church with them: the profile of social and political liberals. (Loehr)

Politicians who base their decisions on what the latest polls say are typically ridiculed for their lack of moral leadership. How much more ridiculous is an entire religious tradition that uses the equivalent of a poll to determine their core values?

In fairness, one has to keep in mind that the original purpose of the Statement, according to its architects, was to create a declaration for the Association’s bylaws that would be so encompassing that no one would feel left out. If its sole purpose then were to provide an inclusive statement in order to hold together a diverse and fragmented coalition, then the Statement might be said to serve that purpose. However, once the Statement began to be exploited by some as a defining covenant, a description of the core of UUism or a limiting factor in the development of religious education curriculum and/or in other such ways, the Statement became more than it was intended. So, in what has often become a boundaryless culture of liberal religion, the Statement lost its prescribed definition and purpose and in many ways so did the collective UU movement. The core of the Unitarian Universalist movement has become so elusive in recent years that many, including some UU clergy, have started to refer to the center of the faith as a “doughnut hole.” In other words, these UU leaders are not sure there’s a there there!

Prior to the 1985 vote, Rev. Carl Scovel wrote: “It is the refusal to take theology seriously which lies at the heart of our current malaise and decline” (Scovel, 128). He went on to suggest that “when someone claims to be ‘inclusive’ and ‘creedless’ they are simply refusing to acknowledge their theological position, a position which necessarily includes some and excludes others” (Scovel, 130–31).

Apparently, a significantly flawed democratic process led to what was considered a nearly all-inclusive statement, for the purpose of making as many congregations and individuals as possible feel they could belong to the Association. Then that statement somehow came to take on a scriptural quality for some, for others a creedal quality, for others a covenantal quality, for others a theological quality, and for others it is considered an apt description of the core of their faith and religion.

Uses and Misuses

The exceptional popularity of the Principles as a guiding statement of common commitment among individual Unitarian Universalists has been surprising. The committee that steered the process leading to near-unanimous adoption of the Principles and Purposes never anticipated the various uses to which their work would be put. (*Engaging*, 126)

Below is a chart of notable ways in which the Principles have been used along with some correlated ways in which they have been misused since 1985.

USES	MISUSES
UU bylaw statement	UU scripture
The emphasis on individual beliefs shifted toward statements of corporate values and commitments	Misused by individuals as their personal credo or statement of belief
A statement of common agreement among UUs nationally (the least common denominator)	Misused as a definitive statement of UU faith by churches and individuals
Unifying	Creedal
Affirms religious pluralism	Reflects an implicit humanist consensus
De-genderized the UU Principles	Removed God
A beginning for UU faith and theology	Misused when seen as a UU theology or as an end in themselves
Used by churches as a responsive reading or a new member reading	Misused when they replace a congregation’s discernment of its own covenant and corporate commitments
Used as a <i>call</i> for evangelism (promote...)	Misused as a <i>tool</i> for evangelism. (vague, general, unmemorable)
Can fit on a wallet card	Misused in place of offering a personal description of one’s faith
References for sermons	Doctrinaire, seen as authoritative
Used as a UU reference point in RE	Misused as a limiting factor in RE curriculum development

Researching ways the Principles are used, the COA discovered:

The Principles are frequently recited in worship and often printed on orders of worship and in newsletters; they are adapted in the place of individual Congregational covenants and prominently displayed in the front of the UU hymnal....The results of our Commission on Appraisal worship survey clearly demonstrate that the Principles and Purposes have become a common expression of UU shared faith. One of the questions asked of each congregation was, "What written statement of purpose or description of your congregation regularly appears on your order of service or other communications?" Even though the question explicitly refers to a statement specific to the congregation, 56 of the 370 responding congregations reported that the UUA's Principles...serve that function for them. Another 86 regularly use the Principles in addition to a statement specific to the congregation (*Engaging*, 126–27).

Many UU congregations have come to use the Principles as their congregation's description or statement of purpose. Goethe said, "A tradition cannot be inherited, it must be earned." By using the UUA's Principles in place of developing a congregational covenant or statement of purpose, these congregations have most likely failed to engage in the formative work that allows a community to understand itself in its place and time and in relation to its particular history. It is conceivable that a congregation could go through a process of discernment that could end in the discovery that the Principles are the best description of their particular identity and purpose as a community of faith. However, I find it improbable that this is how many of the congregations, who use the Principles in this way, came to use them. It is more likely that the UUA's Principles have been adopted by congregations as an easy substitute for doing the formative work of developing a covenant or theological identity or mission that is specific to their congregation. In that way, a bylaw provision that was conceived through compromise and concession and was meant to be a broad description of the minimum that binds UUs together has come to shape the religious identity of many UU congregations and their members.

Even though "a tradition must be earned," it can also be passed down and does not need to be re-created in every generation. Judaism offers a powerful precedent for how a community bound together by a covenant can welcome new generations and individuals into the covenant. The Jewish covenant was presumably formed among those who were present at Mt. Sinai when Moses returned with the commandments. Jews have since developed a tradition of holy days, songs, scriptures, rituals, and study that serve to initiate new generations into the covenant. Passover and other holidays recount how the Jewish people were formed as a religious body, and in effect these rituals serve to initiate new members into the covenant. The covenant and identity of UU congregations would be greatly enhanced through some process that brings new members and new generations "to the mountain" in order that they can have the experience of entering the covenant of their community. A recitation of the UUA Principles is not sufficient for the task.

In a similar way to congregations, many individual UUs have come to adopt the UUA's Principles as their own credo, theology, or scripture. As discussed above, the Principles are not a theology or credo or scripture. It is important that UU leaders begin to regularly clarify for their members the purpose, formation, and limitations of the Principles. Otherwise, members who come to UU congregations are being led astray in their religious lives and identities in some fundamental ways. Surely, many new members and visitors are handed the Principles and are told that these are the center of the UU faith.

Seeds Versus Harvest

The UUA Principles are more like seeds to be planted and tended rather than fruits to be harvested. Like seeds, they are both produced and a producer. They hold within them the promise of something larger, but they require nurture and preparation and careful attention in order to achieve their promise.

In the Parable of the Sower, from the Christian scriptures, Jesus offers the example of a farmer whose seeds fall on four different surfaces. Some fall on the path, others fall on rocky soil, others fall among thorns, and the rest land in fertile soil. The parable helps illustrate how in different situations the Principles either shrivel or thrive.

Seeds that fall on the path refer to those that never get planted. The Principles land on the path when they are seen as a finish line rather than a starting point. In another way, perpetual seekers (or nomads) who claim to be UU but who do not join a community of UUs fail to be planters or cultivators because they do not commit to a place and a community where they can sow and nurture faith and values. The Principles cannot grow if they are not planted firmly in the soil of healthy institutions.

The Principles fall on rocky soil among those individuals and congregations that lack an adequate sense of the traditions, theologies, and histories out of which the Principles have emerged. The Principles grow quickly, but have no roots among those for whom their main authority derives from the fact that the Principles intuitively "feel good and seem right to me (or us)" or for those for whom the Principles have authority solely because they are the official Principles of the UUA. When values are planted in such shallow soil, the heat of the sun burns them up quickly. In other words, the moment that living the Principles becomes hard, they are easily discarded and replaced with a new set of principles that "seem right" and "feel good" for that moment. Another form of rocky soil is found in anemic congregations where there is a culture of financial scarcity. Such congregations lack the generosity and commitment necessary to provide adequate resources for the healthy and sustained growth of the values embedded in the Principles.

The Principles are sown among thorny weeds in church environments where they cannot flourish. Such weedy patches include church cultures where the religious norm is reactionary or where political and secular ideologies dominate the discussion or where talk of God, prayer, and all things theological cannot find space to grow, or where the Bible is unwelcome and where biblical illiteracy and ignorance of religious categories snuffs out healthy religious faith and understanding. Thorny patches include those congregations where conflict between lay leaders and/or religious professionals

dominate. In these environments, no matter how fecund the seeds of faith, they cannot grow.

The Principles find fertile soil in congregations where the ideals and values expressed in the Principles are not worshiped in themselves but are explored and expanded through education, free discussion, theological understanding, historical perspective, worship, and action. In congregations where there is a corporate sense of calling and mission and purpose and identity that transcend the Principles Statement of the Association, one typically finds deep roots and growing branches. Congregations that are held together by an authentic sense of covenant contain the kind of mutual promise among people who keep a community together through fair and foul weather. Fertile soil is also found in congregations where members are generous both personally and financially and therefore offer the kind of support and resources necessary for the healthy growth and expansion of the values that are only nascent and minimally expressed in the Principles themselves.

Evangelistic, but Not Inspiring

The Principles ask us to “affirm and promote” them. In other words, they compel us to spread their values and make them real in the world. Therefore, they are evangelistic, but they are themselves a poor tool for evangelism. Nevertheless, many UUs carry the Principles in their wallets and purses and when asked about their faith they produce the Principles in response. The Principles however read like a bylaw statement. They are not poetic, they lack passion, and they are devoid of grandeur of any kind. As detached as they are from all things memorable, their language is fairly unremarkable. They are general by design, and painfully pedantic when delivered as a description of the faith for which one dedicates his or her life. When someone asks about another’s faith, they do not want a laundry list of well-intentioned but vague sentences.

Religious Education

In the 1980s the Religious Education Futures Committee came into being to review and recommend a new direction for UU religious education. There was widespread dissatisfaction with what came to be known as the “kit curriculum” being used in UU churches in the 1960s and 1970s. Criticism of the kits included:

Many of the materials were too secular and not specifically religious. Indeed, the thought had been that by making the materials general and not specifically Unitarian Universalist, we could market them to schools and other teaching groups and make a profit. This sadly did not prove to be possible, except for [About Your Sexuality]. Congregations wondered if we had forgotten the need to articulate what Unitarian Universalism is and the need to include specific religious content even as we continue to help learners develop a sense of themselves as builders of meaning and identity. Elizabeth Anastos recalls that UUA president Gene Pickett clearly heard the negative feedback from congregations, who were saying, “we

need curriculum that tells us our heritage, our Unitarian Universalist religion, and our unique visions.” (Peebles, 13)

The Futures Report made a number of recommendations including a shift in the design of curriculum “that placed all learning in the context of Unitarian Universalist principles” (Peebles, 21).

The new recommendations encouraged developing curriculum in the spiral model, where a different faith stance is presented, but always including the awareness of learning stages and styles and always naming the inherent Unitarian Universalist principles (Peebles, 25).

As a person who grew up in UU Sunday school in the 1970s and early '80s, I am well acquainted with the “kit curriculum.” I agree that they were lacking in religious content and were ineffective for forming a deep sense of Unitarian Universalist identity as well as for developing a well-informed theological understanding. I have witnessed the shift in religious education curriculum and have seen how young UUs today are getting a much better sense of Unitarian Universalist identity than I did. The Principles have played a major role in creating a sense of unified UU identity in children who grow up learning them in Sunday school. Yet, for many reasons listed above and for more reasons that are about to be outlined, the Principles may be able to create a unified sense of UU identity, just as a good slogan can create a sense of corporate identity in a company. But the Principles, which were born of compromise and reductionism, do not contain what is necessary to fashion a people with deep religious sensibilities or informed theological comprehension. The question remains whether there is a way to create a sense of unified identity in this pluralistic movement that binds UUs together while offering the building blocks for strong, sustaining, theologically and historically rooted congregations and individuals.

General and Particular in Religion

One major problem of generalized principle statements is that, like platitudes, they lack the strength and depth and power of life's particularities. No alcoholic, or person on her deathbed or person in need of forgiveness, no grieving parent or child, no person contemplating divorce, suicide, abortion, or military service turns to the Principles in their time of need or temptation or discernment. They are not enough to sustain faith. Faith and meaning are often mediated by metaphor and stories and symbols. While the Principles may articulate what in general holds UUs together in association, the true sustaining power of faith is in the particularities of the theologies, practices, traditions, and scriptures which inform people's faith.

A unique characteristic of UUism is our theological diversity within one religious community. Much like the United States, out of many, we create one community. Also like the nation, there is disagreement over whether there is a possibility of creating a melting pot in which particular identities are meshed and melded into a coagulated whole or whether diversity requires a salad bowl in which distinctions and particularities are maintained and celebrated. One colleague wrote:

[I do not] suggest that we find a least common denominator among the [various theological] views, as if a diversity of religious philosophies were somehow regrettable. Each of the [theological] views singly is superior to a pale gruel made of parts of all [of them]. Because each one is at least definite about something, the result of human choice rather than an intellectual blender. (Shaw, 134)

The Principles, by design, are a “gruel” made through boiling down the rich particularities of faiths and theologies into a common statement.

...if we are to continue to retain under one umbrella ...the broad categories of faith that now exist in the UUA, we shall all have to develop a tolerance that recognizes the *pluralism* of faiths among us and that takes the *particularities* of the faiths seriously. (Hoehler, 125).

One reason often cited for why Christianity has been so effective in replacing many pagan religions was because it is more intuitive for people to relate to human narratives like the stories of Jesus and Mary and Joseph than it is to relate to a sacred bull or a holy rock or some other deities, icons, or totems. Once the metaphors of religion took names like Peter (instead of an actual rock) and John and Joseph, and these metaphors walked and talked and struggled like the rest of humanity, they developed into a religion that had a powerful appeal. Christianity caught on and spread, in part, due to its natural correlation to real embodied human experience.

It seems that scripture has become increasingly marginal in the practice of UUism, and instead a set of words and phrases (the Principles) has become more and more central. To the degree that this is true, UUs have divorced their religion from stories of raw, breathing, blistering, bleeding, stinking human reality. When I am weeping for my dead daughter, the image of a soiled Mary on her knees holding her son’s lifeless and bloody torso against her body touches the core of my experience; the words “justice and compassion for all people”... are about as inspiring as a phone book.

UUs sometimes connect with the meaning-making power of narrative through telling and retelling the stories of UU martyrs. People are moved by the image of Servetus burning along with his books while tied to a stake surrounded by green wood so that it would burn slowly and torturously to give him a chance to recant before he died. UUs can imagine Francis David in a dark and dampened dungeon using the last of his energies carving the words “neither the sword of Popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death—nothing will halt the march of truth...” in the wall of his cell. People relate to the image of James Reeb with his life bleeding out of him onto the pavement in the dark of night in a strange town while following his conscience. The stories of our heroes and martyrs are stirring and yet we also need our canon to include the stories of our Peters, the ones who wrestled with their souls and decided to deny the request to go to Selma even though they knew they could and believed they should. Our canon needs also to include the parts of these stories such as when Ms. Reeb struggled with her “what ifs.” For the rest of us who live lives that fall short of martyrdom and who live with shame, fear, compromises, regrets, betrayal, temptation, and self-doubt, there

need to be stories of human frailty, sin, and redemption to accompany the stories of human heroism.

One might argue that UUs should compile a unique set of UU stories that contain the full cache of life's struggles, but then again, we already have ancient scriptures which contain a prodigious wealth of stories and metaphors, if only we are willing to read our lives through them or read them into our lives. Established scriptures, like the Bible, provide a language and set of symbols and stories shared by people around the world and throughout the centuries. These are the stories and symbols that shape communities and nations, heal wounds, restore hope and inspire sacrifice and forgiveness. General principles do not and cannot offer this kind of transforming religious power.

The Sources

The discussion of the particularities of faith leads naturally into an examination of the Sources. So far, this paper has primarily focused on the Principles rather than the Sources section of the Statement. For the most part I appreciate the idea that the contemporary UU tradition draws from many sources for insight and wisdom. However, I am concerned that the way the Statement appears to give equal weight to all of these sources misrepresents the UU heritage and traditions. UUism combines two religious traditions which are primarily and historically rooted in Western biblical and intellectual ideas, history, and interpretation. The linguistic, social, ethical, philosophical, and other aspects of what has become the UU tradition owes much more to Western biblical and intellectual sources than to any of the other sources UUism claims. The failure of UUs to acknowledge this dominant foundation of UU identity and culture has significant negative consequences.

As an association, it is critical that we become more honest about our core historic identity and rootedness in the Western biblical and intellectual traditions and therefore to be more clear that we draw on the other sources but we do so as a people within a framework of a religious community that is rooted in a liberal Western intellectual and Christian heritage.

In academia today many historians and theologians introduce themselves in their writing and make it known to the readers that they are writing as a person with a particular social location. The reason for this introduction is to acknowledge that their social location and context has an influence on how they understand their subject. In the same way, UUs (as a community of faith) draw on many sources, but do so through the lens of a particular tradition.

The weight of biblical influence (religiously, intellectually, historically, and culturally) on the UU tradition and its practices and on the collective UU worldview is heavier than any of the other sources. UUs' general failure to be honest about the (past and present) influence of Christianity and the Bible on the UU tradition is a level of self-deception that hinders both UUs' understanding of themselves, their theologies, and their own social location. The UU movement's current dissonance about its biblical rootedness is analogous to a white, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male, American adult denying that his social location has any influence whatsoever on his worldview, faith, and ethics. Such a denial of the roots of UUism comes in part from a

position of unacknowledged privilege as well as sometimes from a desire to be something we are not.

There are North Americans, with European ancestry, who for various reasons (such as guilt, insecurity, and shame) try to claim in various ways that the fullness of their soul is betrayed by the current state of their physical incarnation. These are people who say such things as, "I was Native American in a past life." These people are forming an identity based on a denial of their true history and are posing as someone they want to be instead of owning who they are. The broad denial of UUism's rootedness in Western biblical and intellectual traditions has a similar effect on UUism and contributes to the UU movement's recent inability to articulate a core purpose and identity as a community of faith.

Accepting that UUism is a tradition which is principally rooted and continues to grow out of a Western biblical and intellectual heritage does not require a denial of the rich and varied sources from which we also draw nourishment. However, such an acknowledgment sets UUism honestly in the fertile soil from which it grows and has grown. Like a plant that is nourished not only by soil, but also by sun and rain and dew, UUs grow in breadth and depth from many sources of sustenance but UUs do so planted firmly in the fertile soil of a long biblical heritage. To deny the sustaining and shaping influences of the varied sources of our faith would be like a plant denying the many sources of its nourishment. However, allowing ourselves to lose our self-understanding and primary identity within the Western biblical tradition is equivalent to a plant being uprooted from its soil. James Luther Adams wrote:

We need to strike root into a definite plot of soil. We need somehow to find our place in a continuing and promising tradition with its sacred books, its communion of saints and its disciples. We need the church's community of memory and hope through the sharing of which we may in the fullness of time first sense our need for conversion and then grow in...grace and knowledge....In the church we accept the truth: *by their fruits shall you know them*. But we also accept the truth: *by their roots shall you know them*. Where there are no roots, there will be no fruit. (Beach, 250)

In affirming the Source Statement, UUs have implied that the central values of liberal religion are revealed in varying ways in all of the traditions named as Sources. Certainly there is openness among UUs to learning from the various Sources. At least there is a willingness by UUs to affirm those parts in the many Sources that serve to support what they already believe. This can be likened to the practice of proof texting, or finding passages out of context that support one's biases. Proof texting is a fundamental problem in a "cafeteria" style of religion. With proof texting, a person can read a passage from Confucius alongside one from Jesus in order to make a particular point and to demonstrate that both religions are basically pointing to the same ends. However, the core Christian idea of turning the other cheek is antithetical to the strict, hierarchical ethic of Confucianism. Significant and distinct differences and incompatibilities, like those cited above, rarely get seriously examined when proof texting is an acceptable and normative practice.

A good example of proof texting is the Jefferson Bible, wherein through eliminating the parts he did not agree with, Jefferson created an interpretation of the Christian religion and a version of Jesus that perfectly reflects the values of an eighteenth-century Enlightenment-inspired intellectual. He created a Christianity that reflects the values of Jefferson himself. When fundamentalist Christians pick and choose from the Bible to back up their preconceived beliefs, UUs find it infuriating and disingenuous. When UUs do the same thing, it is usually called liberal religion. Granted, UUs are not claiming to accept the entire Bible literally, yet the essential intellectual and practical problems of proof texting remain the same in both situations.

Interpreting scripture requires some methodology or hermeneutic. Channing in his sermon "Unitarian Christianity" offered a hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible. However, to my knowledge, UUs today do not have, nor do they teach, a hermeneutic for reading scripture(s). The integrity of a system that claims to draw from many sources would be greatly strengthened if there were some established methodological approaches to guide the draw-ers in the ways of credible interpretation. The lack of credible guidelines for interpretation can lead to some pretty incredible beliefs. There need to be guidelines for interpretation that can foster logical consistency, historical accuracy, and theological coherence and that ideally lead to moral fruitfulness.

When parishioners ask me why I do not use more of the world's scriptures representationally throughout the year in my preaching and worship, I explain that I do not know enough about all of these scriptures and traditions to use them authoritatively. So, when I speak of a Buddhist idea, my authority in doing so is limited mostly to what it means to me today and is less informed by what it meant in its time and place and/or what it has meant to believers in our tradition over time or even to believers in its own tradition. I also cannot usually speak to its historic influence on our society. Therefore, without doing extensive research or receiving greater education, when I use other traditions I have uprooted them from their origins and while that can be instructive and even helpful on some level, it may greatly misrepresent the tradition from which it comes. At a minimum, UUs need to be honest about what we are doing when we draw from sources of inspiration about which we are only superficially knowledgeable.

Regarding the biblical traditions, UUs have as much of a claim on the Bible's interpretation as anyone. It has been part of the Unitarian and Universalist families (of faith) for centuries. UUs have a tradition of interpretation and experience with these scriptures to draw upon and UU ministers have at least attained a graduate-level competency in them. Moreover, UUs live in a culture that requires basic biblical literacy for full engagement religiously, politically, intellectually, and rhetorically. The renewal of UUism depends on a rediscovery and reclamation of its primary rootedness in Western biblical religion in a way that also remains open to the plethora of ancient and contemporary sources of wisdom and truth.

Any healthy religious path includes developing an understanding of and aptitude for issues such as forgiveness, redemption, resurrection of the spirit, sacrifice, mercy, love, freedom, and justice. Religious traditions that rely on a particular scripture and a determined set of liturgical practices offer their members a sequence of readings, practices, and rituals throughout the year with the intention of helping them develop competency in these essential aspects of a life of wisdom and wholeness.

Contemporary UUism lacks any methodology or structure that helps ensure that their congregations are offering a well-rounded diet of theological learning and practices. Ministers preach on whatever topic they feel like preaching on. In fact, a UU parishioner could sit in the pews every week for decades and attend Sunday school classes and never encounter a teaching on redemption or sacrifice or forgiveness or mercy from a liberal religious perspective. Due to a lack of liturgical traditions and a lack of accountability to any scripture, and a failure of UU seminary training, UU ministers and UU congregations are usually ill-equipped to provide consistent and adequate training and education (within their congregations) in the ways of a theologically grounded and spiritually centered life. The result is a UU movement that claims in theory to draw on many sources, but that fails in practice to organize their offerings in a way that provides spiritual road maps for people to grow in wisdom and wholeness. This failure to offer a methodology (or road maps) leaves too much to chance and is largely responsible for why the experience of UU religion across the nation is so inconsistent despite a unified Statement of Purposes and Principles.

Missing Principles

In spite of the severe weaknesses outlined above, there will be people who will continue to assert that the Principles are central to UUism and its future. Indeed, the current COA is in the process of reviewing the Statement with the intention of revising or renewing it. With that in mind, there are a number of missing ingredients that, if added, would at least help the Principles become a more balanced articulation of the essential values of liberal religion. Missing ingredients include a sense of sacrifice and human sinfulness and human vulnerability, an articulation of the human need to surrender to something larger than oneself and a commitment to spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, the lack of explicit acknowledgment of sinfulness, sacrifice, and surrender in the current Principles has added to a UU culture that is similar to the way T.S. Eliot once described his Unitarian relatives.

[To be a Unitarian] was to be noble, upright, and superior to all other human beings . . . Unitarians believed that they were already enlightened, the enlightenment for them was an intellectual achievement....Unitarians were put on earth to better the lot of humanity, to be a good and inspiring example....Unitarians were expected to be dutiful, benevolent, cheerful, self-restrained and unemotional....They attended church to set a good example to others. (*Interdependence*, Sec. 5)

In an attempt to rectify the strict Calvinist's overemphasis on original sin, UUs have come to downplay the concept of human sinfulness to a fault. The reality is that UU churches are filled with people who in the course of their lives, or in the past week, have missed the mark, hurt others or themselves, made mistakes, feel ashamed and guilty, and are in other ways in need of succor as well as in need of modes and tools of redemption. UU worship and theology need to be able to meet this deep human reality of sinfulness and need to stop covering it over with a happy face.

UUism also needs to be more explicit about what Bonhoeffer calls “costing commitments”—the willingness to pay a price for one’s commitments. The lack of willingness to sacrifice for one’s values undermines one’s good intentions.

The free church is an organization we establish and join so that we may help each other to find, over and over again, in a thousand varying time frames and settings, what are our own worthiest loves, and therefore, what these loves now require of us. (1 Wesley 12)

One question that arises is whether UUs are willing to “commit to spiritual discipline as deeply as to spiritual freedom?” (*Engaging*, 152). Are UUs willing to sacrifice financially ten percent of their income to support the church and other causes that incarnate their values? Are UUs willing to offer the time and talent to build congregations and an Association that can offer the world an example of the beloved community? Are UUs willing to surrender enough of their individual self-interest to create healthy communities and to allow themselves to be challenged and held accountable by their Church? Are individual congregations willing to agree to responsibilities to the larger Association?

A fundamental problem...is that the structure of the movement gives much authority but very few concomitant responsibilities to individual congregations. The UUA thus makes virtually no demands, but issues only requests, invitations, or advice for such vital elements as financial support; attendance at General Assemblies and district meetings by appropriate delegates; good working relationships with members of the professional ministry; and wide cooperation among congregations. (*Interdependence*, Sec. 5)

It is difficult to build a high-expectation church which transforms lives and shapes nations on a set of vague, unimpassioned Principles that fail to be a living, binding covenant. A covenant by nature involves promise, commitment, and sacrifice. Truly committing to a covenant requires a degree of surrender to something larger than one’s individual self-interests.

[To summarize James Luther Adams:] Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively sometimes the direction of their whole society, will be those liberal churches whose lay members can say clearly, individually and collectively, what are their own most important loyalties, as church members. (1 Wesley 4)

The Principles Statement, as currently written and conceived, is not enough to meet the criteria for what James Luther Adams called strong, effective, and lively churches. The Statement does not articulate clearly enough the most important loyalties of Unitarian Universalists. Nor do the Principles affectively bind UUs in covenant.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are five primary actions called for by this paper.

First, Unitarian Universalist leaders need to do a much better job of clarifying for the movement and their congregations what the Principles Statement is and is not and how they can be used and misused.

Second, there needs to be much greater clarity and discernment about the Unitarian Universalist tradition's relationship to the many sources, and a fundamental reclamation of the biblical and scriptural roots of UUism.

Third, UUs need to develop guidelines and a methodology for reading and understanding scripture(s) so that "picking and choosing" involves interpretation and exegesis that has integrity, consistency, coherence, historical accuracy, and moral profitability. In other words, interpretation that involves more than an "it feels good to me" hermeneutic.

Fourth, instead of leaving so much to chance and to the idiosyncrasies of individual ministers and congregation, UUs need to articulate clearer road maps for their congregations for the fashioning of religiously whole people and communities. Such a process will involve identifying what are the essential spiritual and theological topics and competencies for living a life of love, wisdom, and wholeness. Then, it will require congregations providing a consistent and systematic set of offerings through worship, ritual, education, and spiritual practices week after week and year after year. UUism needs something analogous to a liturgical year or lectionary type system that is set in a context of freedom of belief and a plurality of resources. By whatever name, the system and process need to offer members an annual cycle of worship and programming which involves essential issues such as creation, brokenness, confession, atonement, forgiveness, redemption, faith, death, renewal, grace, and more.

Finally, UUs need a clear and binding covenant as a movement and especially within individual congregations that require true sacrifice and surrender and that include powerful ways for people to enter the covenant.

A Unitarian Universalist movement with these principle qualities and a strong sense of purpose and identity can indeed be the source of a powerful and much-needed reformation in religion—a reformation that both Unitarian Universalism and the world desperately need.

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