

'Strange Bed Fellows'?: Human Rights, Scripture(s) and the Seven Principles

First of all, I would like to thank this group for inviting a feminist biblical theologian to join your deliberations and discussions on the various influences which affect the formation of a global 'conscience'. Feminist critical analysis of religion and ethics often differs substantially from that of the traditional male experts who tended to dominate this field of discourse, and so ought always to be a part of the discussion--- but all too often it is not! I have chosen today to speak on the challenges and difficulties in any attempt to anchor basic notions of human rights in the 'traditional' forms of the Scripture based religions of the world. This is a point of view contrary to many positions taken by thinkers in ethics and moral philosophy, and in some ways echoes the UU Women's Federation's challenge to the 1961 Principles and Purposes Statement of our Association. Since the ambiguities of which I speak are especially observable with reference to establishing rights for women and girls, I will be using that group as a lens for focusing my topic. I will speak primarily of the Peoples of the 'Book'---the Bible---, not just because this is what I know best, but also because it is to **this** Book as read by Jews and Christians that Unitarian Universalists trace many of their founding ideas. However, according to some experts on the status of women, the questions raised here about the content and effects Scriptures apply equally to other classical religions like Hinduism and Buddhism,¹ but as those religions are outside my area of expertise, I'm sticking with the Bible.

1. A Preliminary Statement: The Problem with Terminology and Sources of Human Rights

The dramatic political changes of the last century form a backdrop to epistemological dialogue about human rights which began as long ago as the Enlightenment. What exactly *are* human rights and from where do they come? (And in a world of biocentric pluralism,² an ecofeminist might also add a question: why is it that only the human species is accorded rights?) *Is* it true as Natural Law philosopher John Locke said, that certain rights are inalienable? Are rights really present if one cannot enjoy them, or if there is no way to enforce them? How do we establish universal rights in a plural world? Indeed, does not all this focus on the worth of a single individual suggest that the whole concept is beholden to a Eurocentric individualism that cannot be considered especially normative? Does the recognition that someone does in fact have a 'right' (such that they are considered a right-bearer) always imply a duty-bearer who must respect or at least, not hinder, the enjoyment of the right-bearer's right? And is the 'right' itself the real matter at stake or is it the object of the right which the right-bearer is seeking to enjoy?³ Do rights emerge as a function of hypothetical contracts, or are contracts only possible in the context of rights? Are we obliged to be able to show rational grounds for positing human rights before we can enforce them? Are human rights absolute---that is, should they be considered a normative requirement regardless of culture, tradition, national laws, and so on?⁴

These are only some of the questions of jurist and moral philosophy that beset those of us who would like to establish universal human rights, and space precludes discussion of all of them here. I will just say that for those of us in a pragmatic, advocacy position with respect to understandings of entitlement to rights, we do NOT cede that a right does not exist simply because a group is not allowed to enjoy it (or its object), no one is willing to enforce it, or because the religious teachings of the community in question do not choose to recognize that right.

Wherever we choose to lodge the source of universal human rights, be it God or Natural Law or feminist anthropology, we do believe them to exist, even in the absence of their enjoyment, enforcement or cogent foundation. This point will become especially important later as religious reformers attempt to argue that human rights are ceded in their scriptures and only require recognition or enforcement to correct their denial to certain groups, such as women, children and dissenters---the three great groups who are largely marginalized in most religions' thinking about rights. Simply put, human rights are rights which belong to every human, simply by virtue of being born human. The extended effect of these intrinsic rights is that there are some things which should never be done to *any* human, just as there are some things which ought to be done for *every* human. Simple enough, or so you would think until you waded into the discourse on how to ground those rights! (This quest for lucidity has been dubbed 'Human Rights Foundationalism', and is sometimes felt to be a theoretical barrier to the activity of securing and enforcing human rights.)

Most importantly for Unitarian Universalists who seek to use 'reason', 'freedom' of inquiry and 'tolerance', perhaps our most key, liberal guiding principles⁵, in the last two or three centuries there has been a radical shift in thinking about the role of religion in the obtaining and enforcing universal human rights. Philosophers of the Enlightenment noted, not without reason, that, historically, religious groups had largely neglected the rights of many: slaves, women, children, and most especially, those who dissented from the doctrinal statements of the given religion. Human Rights, almost always conceived as the 'rights of Man', were anchored in both historical moments when rights were secured by secular groups---the signing of the Magna Carta, for example---and in the philosophies of Natural Law, most especially in John Locke, the hypothetical social contracts of Kantian ethics, or the Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill. From the point of view of the Enlightenment, the supernaturalism permeating most of the religions then known rendered them both irrational (in a very narrow sense of rationality) and outdated as a source for universal ethical norms.

After the political struggles of 20th Century, however, we live in a new world. The Enlightenment's high hopes for rationality or new, better systems capable of replacing religion seem unfounded. Nazi extermination of the Jews was profoundly rational, and guided by a freedom of inquiry (just how long will it take a Jew to die under certain circumstances) and a profound belief in scientific method. The notion of universal human rights, too, gets harder and harder to anchor in a pluralistic world. It has been shown cogently that our philosophies of rights are largely Eurocentric---a kind of 'acquired taste' of Western communities. Further, those philosophies are beset by a kind of moral relativism that allowed philosophers and politicians to pursue their self-interested or national goals as though they were universally normative.

In this climate, some ethicists and philosophers are again making the case that human rights talk makes sense *only* in the context of religious talk and assumptions.⁶ What a reversal!! But what *are* those religious ideas, principles or sources that ought to ground our notion of universal human rights, and will they indeed save us? For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all possessing interrelated Scriptures claiming some sort of normative values, we must begin with an understanding of the those Scriptures. I think it is fair to say that the 'inherent worth and dignity of every person', while perhaps implicit in each Scripture, has been honored more in its breach than its practice. Let's look more closely at how this came about before we wave a fond goodbye to reason, tolerance and freedom in our search for binding norms capable of preventing the atrocities reported daily on the internet by human rights organizations.

2. The Formation of Classical Religions of 'the Book'

The trio of religions which call the Torah sacred all began in the Fertile Crescent of the

ancient Near East: those regions we speak of today as the 'Middle East', 'Near East', 'Levant' or other such term. Each of the three religions emerged in sociopolitical contexts in which the new faith was forced to struggle for acceptance and its very survival. Each, to a different degree, spoke a message of increasingly radical monotheism or its reinterpretation with the inclusion a divine messiah, a message which was at odds with the dominant forms of faith in its culture. This legacy of persecution and difference in message or practice accounts for much of the three Scripture's xenophobic attitudes towards the Other, understood as anyone outside the community of the new 'true' faith. Yet 'human rights' philosophies make clear that the human being who is to be accorded the 'rights' is that very Other we have been taught to suspect! (No group, religious or otherwise, ever seems to question its *own* intrinsic qualifications for having 'rights'.) How, then, do the religions of the Book find a way to overcome the rooted suspicion and devaluation of the Other?

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all value, including morality, derives from God, not humanity. Humans are deserving of salvation not because of anything to do with *their nature or rights*, but because God has created them and would redeem them. It is safe to say that the human rights concepts of the Peoples of the Book are rooted in what Christian theologian David Tracy calls the 'analogical imagination'⁷: all humans are understood as children of One Fathering Parent, a loving God, who binds us all into One Family, will we or nil we.⁸ Given each religion's fundamental affirmation of a this paternal Creator God, almost always imaged as male and referred to as male,⁹ we find that the enactment of the goals of religious human rights often falters at the point where generalizations are to be applied to the female half of humanity. We may all be children of God the Father, but some have always been the 'favorites' while others are the step-children. Contrary to some theorists who emphasize the inherently religious nature of human rights discourse,¹⁰ feminists often find it difficult to unearth a great deal within the Scripture of each group which supports the notion of *intrinsic* human value and dignity for women and girls (it should be noted that the religions differ from each other in the nuances of how they regard the concept of universality). In secular human rights debates, it is much easier to find straightforward support of human rights for *all* humanity, even though the classic documents of Western philosophy which serve as source material for these rights usually are narrowly framed in ways that exclude women, children, slaves and those who do not hold property. (The 'threshold' for having rights is almost always one's maleness: rationality, property, superiority). If we find that religion has betrayed the rights of some of the human family, it should at least be remembered that secular society had done no better, at least so far.

3. Brief Histories with Respect to the Concept of Human Rights

Judaism. Scholars debate with considerable vigor the possibility of fixing a time of origin for the earliest of these scripture-based thought systems, but by the Iron Age (approx. 1000-587 BCE in the Levant), we are able to point to numerous archaeological finds and literary texts which witness to the emergence of a nation of 'mixed' tribes who identified themselves as 'Israel' and 'Judah'. Many experts would argue that the foundational group whose progeny later emerged as Israel were in fact already in the area by the time of the Bronze Age (3200-1000, BCE, divided into Early, Middle, and Late archaeological periods), existing as a social class of outcasts, runaway slaves, mercenaries and those displaced for whatever reason (the so-called A 'apiru' of Late Bronze Age texts). The Hebrew Bible proclaims that this people, who worshiped a deity known as 'The God of the Fathers', found themselves enslaved in Egypt and were delivered from that slavery by the direct intervention of their god. In grateful response to this 'redemption', the people agreed to follow the laws of that God and forgo the worship of any other entity. Respect for slaves, foreigners, the widow and orphan were made part of the law code the people were to follow. This

early codification of 'rights' is based on the idea that the people, marginal groups or freed slaves themselves, knew the bitterness of oppression and so should seek to ameliorate it for others. In fact, the ancient Near East routinely expected its kings and gods to protect the rights of a few particular groups: widows and orphans were disadvantaged by having no patriarchal male to care for their economic provision; the 'stranger' within the gate was also protected, at least in part because the law codes presume such a sojourner to be a merchant or diplomat from another country with whom one has trade or treaty agreements. Ancient Israel added two 'new' groups to the social concerns protected by its god. The first of these groups is slaves, especially slaves of one's own ethnic group held in slavery by someone of another nationality; the second was the 'citizen army', an all-volunteer force dedicated to protecting the newly settled and amalgamated group from surrounding city states. Together, these five groups: widows, orphans, sojourners, slaves and volunteers make up what one scholar has called 'Yahweh's special interest groups'.¹¹ Note please that they are 'groups', and not individuals, who are thought to have right of special appeal to the Hebrew God for protection.

While scholars debate whether this 'Exodus' (from slavery in Egypt) is historical or an imaginative narrative, its impact on the theology and thought world of the people who made this story "Scripture" is indisputable.¹² Eventually, 'Judaism' is the name given to the system of religious beliefs and laws belonging to the descendants of the people of Israel and Judah. Long after their states had been conquered and annexed by various imperial kingdoms---the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks, the teachings of Torah lived on. Because of these vicissitudes of its national fortunes, the Jews had to find a way to become a 'people' after they were no longer a nation. This was done through zealous guardianship of standards of endogamous marriage and focus on religion as a distinctive feature of that people. At the same time this people was struggling for its survival in all their 'uniqueness', they found themselves scattered throughout the Roman Empire in the West and the former provinces of the Persian Empire in the East. Hence, ALL their laws had to be continuously reinterpreted to fit new cultural and geographical conditions. Torah could not change and did not need to change---indeed, it was held to contain all one ever needed to know---but *interpretation* of the Torah was ongoing, diverse, and was held to be as binding and normative as the original written laws.

Christianity. The later development of Christianity in 1st- 2nd century CE was originally viewed by its first adherents as a liberation and reform movement within Judaism. At its inception, the Jesus-movement proclaimed the real arrival and presence of the 'Kingdom of God', a 'golden' era marked by peace and justice in every aspect. The vision of such a kingdom was the people's response to the ongoing political and economic oppression by Imperial Rome and the Jewish community's struggle against Greek cultural domination. When Roman officials overseeing the province of Judea executed the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, as a political criminal, his life and death served as the central rallying point for his followers. When a large portion of the Jewish population failed to accept the claims of the early 'Jesus movement', the message was then taken to Gentile (non-Jewish) populations. A new religion was born, but one that was aware of its earlier origins in Judaism, although much of that uneasy legacy had to be translated for its non-Jewish audience into the very Hellenistic idioms it had originally opposed.¹³ For the next 300 years, this religion spread throughout the Roman empire, making ample use of the Roman road system to reach the urban centers where its message seemed to take hold with the most fervor. Finally, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine in 325 C.E. at the Council of Nicea. For some it remains a question as to *whose* triumph this actually represents: did Christianity win out over the Roman Empire, or did the Roman Empire successfully assimilate Christianity to its hierarchical, imperial world-view? Answers to this question are varied.

Membership in the household of Christ was not predicated upon one's birth or nationality. This innovation was required of the nascent movement, since eventually Gentiles had become the dominant group, replacing Christian Jews as the proponents of this faith. Slaves and masters, men and women, Gentiles and Jews were all to find a place at this new table of salvation which God had set, but the price of a seat was a firm and universally required profession: 'Jesus is Lord'. In the early centuries, this came to mean both a rejection of the dominion of the Roman Emperor, *and* an exodus from the heritage of Judaism or one's previous belief system.

Islam. As a state religion whose heavenly goals just happened to mirror the imperial aspirations of the empire, the internal struggles of the Roman Empire as well as its external rivalry with the Persian Sassanian empire set much of the agenda of the Church's struggles against 'wrong' belief and 'wrong' action. These conflicts eventually ended in a schism which split the Western Empire and its church from the Eastern Empire with its version of the one, true Faith. During these centuries of squabbles, the populace of the Near East remained largely under the rule of the Christian Roman Empire, much to the detriment of the quality of life of Jewish communities, whose religious and political rights were steadily abridged. The rise of Islam in 7th century Arabia was itself a response to the political, theological and moral disarray in its own world and the rivalries of the two great imperial powers of Byzantium and Persia. A reaction to the materialism and ethical bankruptcy of the wealthy merchant class of Mecca, Muhammad's message was heard as a threat to that reality.¹⁴ Born in the crucible of political as well as theological opposition, Islam was spread by faith and sword in contexts determined to suppress it, and like Christianity before it, achieved much in its centuries of expansion, until it ranged from the Indian continent to the Atlantic Ocean.

Like Christianity before it, the nation of Islam, the 'Umma, had different rules for membership than Judaism. While it is true that most Muslims in the early period of establishment of the religion came primarily from Semitic groups, Islam was much like Christianity in allowing for true and authentic membership by converts who professed the one-ness of Allah and the exalted status of Muhammad as Allah's messenger. The Quran was viewed then as the unmediated word of Allah, delivered to Muhammad verbatim and without error by the angel Gabriel. Thus, the Quran and its profession of Allah became the ultimate rule of faith and source of all authority. In the 7th century, the Quran was quite 'forward-looking' for its time in many respects in its view of right relations between humanity and Allah. Interpretation, however, eventually became necessary as cultural conditions shifted. This was accomplished by the collection of 'ahadith': a hadith is an originally 'oral' tradition about the life of Muhammad and his practices (Sunnah) which were later collected, and committed to writing. Once all the ahadith had been found, written and collated, it was still necessary to assess and clarify how they were to be applied to daily life. Traditions of interpretation of this originally oral body of teachings arose: some hadith were considered 'strong'--coming from multiple sources and standing in clear continuation of Quranic teachings. Others are considered 'Hasan', less reliable, because of the quality of the narrators of the account. Other hadith were considered 'weak': only a single source and/or questionable authenticity of content when compared to the Quran or strong ahadith. In this way, cultural opinion and context could make its weight felt in the interpretation of a Quran that never changed.¹⁵

4. The Woman Question: Patriarchal Interpretation of the Religions of the Book

The three religions of the Book came into being in patriarchal cultures whose male-biased organization and thought-world was well established long before the arrival of Jews, Christians and Muslims. This simple fact has left a profound mark on the interpretation of the potentially liberating content of the different faiths, and Neo-Pagans would do well to note that their

traditions also bear the same stamp of patriarchal origin. Whether tribe or state, cultures throughout the ancient Near East and classical world agreed in their estimation that women were somehow more fallible, more 'sinful', more imperfect than their male counterparts, and used those biased beliefs to limit the rights of women as persons and as a group.¹⁶ Though *many* women are present in the stories of the foundation and spread of each of the religions of the Book, clearly exercising power and serving their god with their whole selves, their accomplishments and commitments were trivialized, ignored, hidden or distorted by the androcentric bias of their societies. Ironically and tragically, as godly accomplishments of women in their religions were slowly obscured by male authorities and popular interpretation, that same trends in interpretation simultaneously made Woman solely responsible for the entrance of evil into the world, thus justifying for many the curtailment of her rights as a moral necessity approved---nay, required!---by God of all true believers.

Hence, the 'Scripture' of all three religions has been the victim of biased interpretation, almost from its inception. However the group may think of its Book as 'inspired' by a deity in whatever way, the *texts themselves* were largely edited, copied, transmitted and interpreted *by* males for the benefit of males.¹⁷ At the materialist level, the exclusion of women from the public, male world of power was justified by their status as mothers and potential mothers who would be the primary care-givers to children, thus making it unnecessary to educate them as one would a man who was expected to deal with the world outside the home. Denied education and the advancement made possible by the acquisition of professional skills, women were seldom able to become qualified 'experts' as interpreters of their faith traditions, and so could mount no authoritative, theological opposition to the curtailment of their personhood. Women who 'succeeded' as saints did so at the expense of renunciation of female sexuality, and so the exemplar of their holy lives could be deemed irrelevant to the existence or abilities of 'regular' women who had embraced their lives as wives and mothers.

Depending on the religion's view of 'spirit', 'body', 'flesh' and 'sex', women might fare better or worse. Jewish women were valued as mothers of an embattled minority, so were less likely to be despised for their reproductive roles. Under later persecution in European Christian nations, Jewish women became the public negotiators for their families in the marketplace and village. The preferred high-status roles of Torah-scholar and student went to the males of the community, who were less at risk from Christian violence when they remained sequestered in study.

Christian women were burdened with the gynophobia of Hellenistic philosophy which feared and debased women as inferior 'matter' in contrast to male 'spirit', bearers of 'emotion' instead of 'rationality'. For Christian theologians, motherhood itself still partook of the material, fallen part of the world, so some women found other options more appealing in the quest to secure their authenticity before their god. These variations took several forms. The appeal of the monastic celibate life might well have been a refuge both from male authority and early death in childbed, and must have been an especially welcome option for lesbians of the time. Further, with some wonderful maneuvering, experienced women seized upon the NT's and Greek world's hatred of female sexuality to affirm a widow's right NOT to remarry, thus retaining control over her own economic resources. Unmarried women were celebrated when they became virgin martyrs of the early Church. Those who had no taste for chastity or death as a means of securing their salvation looked to the heretical practices of so-called 'witchcraft', better understood as wise women healing traditions from non-Christian groups. All of these options must be understood as women's resistance to the religious classification of the female body as morally defective and in need of constant control by male relatives or authorities. Since the Christian community is 'born' by 'faith' (a work of the 'spirit'), rather than 'by flesh' as the Jewish community is reproduced, mothers and

sex partners are less necessary to the group's ultimate viability, even though the NT proclaims that it is through childbirth that women shall be 'saved' from their guilt of bringing sin into the world. One 'new' gospel found in Egypt in the 20th century takes the point further, going so far as to state that for women, Jesus Christ exercises his ultimate, redemptive power by making them into men: 'Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' (G Thom 114.20)¹⁸ Such formulations, whether enforcing compulsory motherhood or spiritual sex-change, do not represent good news for the women of these faiths from a human rights perspective.

In the world of Islam, we see perhaps the most glaring disparity between the teachings of its Holy Book and their popular interpretation by a patriarchal society.¹⁹ The Quran speaks of the rights and duties to obtain between family members more than any other topic in the realm of 'human rights', and provides explicit protections for women within and without marriage, based on the *recognition* of their disadvantaged status under patriarchy. Along with its position on the evils caused by the existence of slavery, a topic neither Judaism nor Christianity attacks so directly in *their* source Scriptures, the Quran's view that each person, male and female, owes primary allegiance to God without bowing to any intermediary has indeed allowed some Muslim scholars to refer to their book as the 'Magna Carta of Human Rights'. However, these principles were consistently eroded by traditional, androcentric bias of its interpreters. The role of motherhood continued to be a sanctified, approved one, but the 'materiality' of human women who sneeze, menstruate, and give birth was negatively contrasted with the fantastical Houris, the highest expression of femaleness. These exotic, sexual servomechanisms meted out to heroes of the faith in Paradise had renewable hymens, and never, ever required a handkerchief or a midwife. If such beings constitute the heavenly *reward* for men, then real Muslim women could be understood as an earthly antithesis, a punishment or burden of sorts from. In the realm of official theology, the on-going lack of expert female participation in interpretation has left us with an Islamic world in which many, if not most average, Muslims firmly believe that woman's inferiority is a major tenet of their faith, and that any 'Westernized' appropriation of concepts of human rights for women must *necessarily* entail a betrayal of their most fundamental religious commitments.²⁰

Parenthetically, but not unrelated, are the problems raised by the Book's externalized, sky-god theologies for the natural world, slaves and children. Both slaves and children were clearly regarded as property of the patriarchal household, and though the Hebrew Bible and the NT attempt to ameliorate the conditions of these biologically functional 'objects', they do not really address anything like a concept of intrinsic worth, which **is** a concern in the Quran. But in all three religions, the Earth and all its creatures---Gaia, the biosphere, the interdependent web---however we name it---are simply matter created by God with no inherent value or rights, except those assigned by the Creator. Modern feminist readers, along with traditional groups practicing Earth-based spiritualities from around the world, find this ontological situation with respect to our interdependent web of being totally unacceptable. In ecofeminist interpretative projects, we find the Bible turned on its head with respect to planet Earth.²¹ Using the format of a prophetic covenant lawsuit, the God of the Book has been put on trial for murdering trees in Ezekiel, for flooding all the earth in Genesis, and consigning all life on this Water Planet to the fires in Revelations. Outcome? Guilty as charged. Some of us conclude that classical Scripture traditionally interpreted cannot save polar icecaps or the ozone layer when read within its dominant patriarchal framework.

4. What is To Be Done?, or 'How 'Bout Those UUs?'

In the midst of Scripture-based religions which must seek a Father God to give every human person worth, or during the verbal fist-fights between secular activists and religious reformers who are all too often at each other's throats, it's nice to have Seven Principles, isn't it? Our 'Purposes and Principles Statement', adopted in 1985, lists as its first Principle (all together now):

*'The inherent worth and dignity of every person'*²²

The language of the First Principle sounds as though it could have been taken from the United Nations' 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (U. N. Doc. A/811), voted by the General Assembly in 1948. The first paragraph of the Preamble to that document reads

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom justice and peace in the world...²³

The fifth paragraph of the Preamble states:

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...²⁴

Then after two more Preamble paragraphs, the Declaration goes on to proclaim thirty distinct articles wherein basic and extended human rights are identified and granted. The first of these articles proclaims that all are born 'free and equal in dignity and rights'.²⁵ Language throughout is androcentric and adult-centered, urging man to behave with all due considerations of 'brotherhood', and certainly grounded in Western philosophy and political theory. The Preamble *in toto* shows that the real force behind it is functional: without respect for human rights across the board, peace with justice will never exist. The nations proclaim human rights, then, because the alternative is already too well known from world history, and cannot be tolerated in a world with weapons of mass destruction. In subsequent years, practical realization of the limiting force of the language of the document demanded a further proclamation of Human Rights for women and children in two separate documents especially concerned with establishing their rights. (Clearly, the feminist critique of male-exclusive language as just that, language that excludes those other than adult males from full personhood, proved to be true in the real-world attempt to apply the Universal Declaration to all humans!) But even in its customary male-oriented form, the Universal Declaration was considered so outrageous that some nations abstained from the vote: the republics of the Soviet Union, the Union of South Africa, Yugoslavia, and Saudi Arabia all refused to ratify the Declaration. Though the Declaration remains more of a philosophical position paper, it currently holds a semi-legal force although it is not actually a 'law'. Although it cannot be directly enforced through legal measures---or at least, it hasn't been yet---it provides the needed legal warrant to address some of the world's tragedies.

Looking at this document which is the current foundation for secular and international attempts to promote universal human rights, we can see a strong harmony between it and the UU Seven Principles. Our 'Purposes and Principles' Statement actually goes further than the UN Declaration in that, as the more recent statement, it recognizes the interdependence of the ecosystems that constitute our world and views humans as a part of that interacting system. Further, as a denominational statement, our document goes on to name the *sources* for our principles whereas the UN document carefully eschews a discussion of whence their universal principles derive. Is it that the UN thinks those principles are so self-evident that they need no mention, or is it rather that they know perfectly well that there is no way to construct a common secular source for rights which would be accepted by all participants in the Declaration? I suspect

the latter is the case, but for UUs, our document suggests that we know where our warrants come from, and that we value those sources from the past and find them empowering.²⁶ The sources for our affirmations are: direct experience of the Sacred, prophetic words and deeds, wisdom from world religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings and earth-based spiritualities.²⁷

Compared to the current struggles between secular and religious human rights advocates, UUs seem, as usual, to have split the difference and embraced the paradox of claiming that *both* humanistic philosophy, tempered by non-Western world-views, *and* Scriptures, especially the Bible, can be twin sources for our commitments. Yet, often those two bodies of thought are seen to be mutually exclusive, or at the very least, uneasy partners. Even within each pole of the continuum there are contradictions aplenty! How exactly do we hold together the Bible's view of humanity made in God's image and hence, crown of creation endowed with innate dignity, with a Native American consciousness of *all* living entities as bearers of life, worth and dignity? When push comes to shove, which value do we choose and do we have a good reason for choosing the one and not the other? If we *do* have a reason, can we articulate it in an intelligible way to those who do not share our faith?

Now, these are all good and worthy questions, and certainly deserving of answers, but in the way of any good theologian, I must tell you that I haven't time to take up each one here--I suspect that could be a life's work in and of itself! However, I *can* address some of the implications of our embrace of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Scriptures for a UU position on universal human rights.

The record on human rights for women and girls associated with the classical religions of the Book is abysmal, because each faith was traditionally interpreted in a gender-biased or culturally parochial fashion. Nevertheless, each of the three religions contain significant insights and theological warrants for the establishment of universal human rights, even though those insights derive from theological ideas about divine authorization. I suspect that UU theists and Universalists will have an easier time than secular humanists in appropriating these scriptural views. Judaism's most fundamental ethical concept for humans emerges out of the Book of Leviticus, a work not largely hailed for its liberating impulses: in a verse which has been given a variety of translations, Lev 19:16, we read: 'You shall not go around spreading scandal among your people; you shall not stand idly by in the presence of your neighbor's blood; I am the Lord'. The ethical principle of all the Law and Prophets is seen here: because God's nature is just and holy, believers must behave in harmony with those principles, and this cannot be limited to relations only in one's own family or among one's own sex. It is easy enough to give the whole essence of the Torah as the rabbis did, 'standing on one foot'²⁸, or as Jesus repeatedly taught: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) Though early apocalyptically-minded Christianity opted for an 'other-worldly' solution²⁹ to this world's problems, the execution of its innocent leader on trumped-up political charges creates a natural affinity for a religious pursuit of 'human rights'. The Quran, too, weighs in on the subject of human rights: part of the 'sacred duty' Allah has commanded is 'that ye slay not life which Allah hath made sacred, save in the course of justice' (Surah 6.151), and that all persons, male or female, who believe in God and do 'justice' will be rewarded by Allah (Surah 2.62; Surah 4:124; Surah 9.97).³⁰ Likewise, the Quran affirms the right to freedom of religion, freedom of movement, and the importance of individual ethical choice.

None of the three religions of the Book would accept the secular assumptions of the Western tradition found, for example, in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as *their* primary reason for existence of 'human rights'. In their Book, all good derives from a supreme

Creator who is characterized by compassion and justice. This does not mean, though, that members of these religions cannot join the struggles of those who act out of altruistic, secularly motivated convictions. Some of us abiding in religious communities require justice the way fish require water: it is the basic condition of our existence. We are compelled to speak by the certainty that this is what our God or our world require of us, male or female, East or West, Jew, Christian, Muslim or Other. Feminist interpreters of their Book take up their task out of more than personal self-interest as women or men, or because it is necessary to convince the narcissistic West that 'human rights' are 'good for business', thus promoting fair rather than free markets. Rather, it is a matter of faith, and for us, faith matters. We challenge patriarchal interpretation not just because it is against humanity, freezing both women and men in circumscribed, inflexible roles which rob them of dignity and growth, but because we believe it also violates the whole interdependent web of Life. As UUs, we need not apologize for having religious as well as rational, philosophical underpinnings for our Principles, nor should we consent to our activism being labeled irrelevant because it proceeds from those principles.

The other side of this affirmation of religious sources for human rights talk in Unitarian Universalism is that no one 'foundation' can be a source of absolute authority, given our emphasis on a pluralistic appropriation of what is good in the religions of the world, and our commitments to tolerance. We must make space for humanists, atheists, agnostics, pagans and whomever to join the conversation, and that means attending to currents in secular political theory, law, and ethics. As I hope this essay has shown, no *one* source of human rights, be it religious or secular, can be said to be without difficulties, whether they be epistemological, theological, or practical. Is there any other group as well prepared to interact with evangelical Christians, orthodox Jews or moderate Muslims, *and* international non-governmental agencies to effect realistic solutions? If anyone is going to be able to get the Mullahs to talk to the aid-workers to achieve a common goal, I suspect it will happen at least in part because there are a couple of no-nonsense, mediating UU on the team trying to keep everyone focused on the appalling realities at hand.

As persons who have rejected rigid interpretation of Scripture in favor of a liberal, open-ended conversation with Scripture, we are ideally suited to hear the very real concerns of secular aid workers, lawyers or politicians. Who knows better than us that simply leaving the distribution of services and resources to religious authorities is no guarantee of fairness and justice? At the same time, we have some affinity for those who do this heart-breaking work out of deep religious conviction. We can here the Muslim speak passionately about Islam's record on human rights; we can honor a non-Western world-view that calls the industrialized, polluting nations to account for the horrors they have brought upon the indigenous peoples of the earth and the biosphere itself. We can affirm the feminist critique of Divine Fatherhood, and seek the welfare of all entities and not just the humans of Planet Earth. We can even love Locke, Kant, and all the rest, but feel no compunction about calling them to account for their androcentric ethnocentricity and the specious conclusions that flow from that fundamental set of mistakes. We have a special role to fill in this work, and I suggest we get on with it!

A rather nasty little book by evangelical professor Alan Gomes in Zondervan's '*Guide to Cults and Religious Movements*' series (we are right up there with Astrology, Hinduism, Mormonism, Satanism and goddess worship among others!) suggests that UUs are particularly difficult to 'witness to' and 'convert' because, having so many sources of authority, we simply switch foundations if anyone succeeds in undermining one or the other in their quest to secure our subjection to their doctrinal creeds. We are, he opines, persons who want the 'trappings of church' without 'having to submit to biblical morality commanded by an absolute God'.³¹ We don't know *what* we think or why, and can be easily confounded by evangelical truth since 'it is quite likely

that the UU has embraced his or her beliefs without much reflection'.³² Yet, in the midst of all of this muddled thinking about Divine Truth, we are the most highly educated of all religious groups, and we have the greatest percentage of ordained women of any denomination. Despite all these flaws and our tiny size, numerically speaking, we exercise a pervasive influence on public policy with our fancy for liberal social activism. Apparently, though we are the kind of folks who would run a mile from a creed, we also run straight into burning buildings simply on the notion that as humans, we ought to render help wherever needed. Clearly, Prof. Gomes considers that most of our denominational traits confirm his very worst conservative fears about liberalism and religious tolerance, but I would read most of his critique, if not some of the company he puts us in, as a signal compliment. We fight the good fight without necessarily subscribing to only one reason for doing so: in a plural world, we are prepared to be pluralist without sacrificing our own grounds of being: reason, freedom, tolerance. We can weather a post-modern critique without giving up on rational attempts to make sense of what is transitory, and what is lasting in human affairs.

5. Speaking Out in the Age of Communication: the Role of the Internet in Human Rights Work

This would not be a Unitarian Universalist perspective on human rights work if it only treated theory and had no pragmatic suggestions for not simply talking the talk, but walking the walk, too: deeds, not creeds³³—right? There are concrete things every person here, every fellowship can do, even in the absence of any one concrete foundation for an ethic of universal rights. Human rights abuses flourish in secrecy, just as hatred and fear of the Other thrive when real, non-violent contact is made impossible. However, in the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the isolation required for atrocities to proceed unchecked has been breached by the 'connectedness' brought to us through the Internet and the World Wide Web. At our fingertips, we have a living, crashing example of the interdependent web of life becoming manifest as we drink our morning coffee. Clearly, we have a magnificent tool available to us to support, disseminate, teach, warn, mobilize protest, and make change possible. If you think that the simple act of sending an email cannot have impact, then you haven't been following the case of Zafran Bibi of Pakistan, sentenced to public stoning for having been raped, but now free on the order of Pres. Musharraf who is anxious to keep the good will of the West as he attempts to mobilize the moderates of his country.

One of the blessings of this technology to those who have it is that it is, in effect, 'color blind': the Internet has the potential to bring international access to places and people who could never have achieved this any other way. There is finally a concrete way in which the peoples of this planet may know themselves as one Earth, with similar problems and challenges, hopes and dreams.

This connectivity is not without its problems, of course. We are all aware of the problems of security, cyber-terrorism, and the medium's ability to disseminate hate as well as peace (just type 'White Race' into a search engine if you need convincing!). For those of us who see this technology as a profound tool for the good, an even more critical problem is that of access. Rich nations with 'access' must address the so-called 'Digital Divide'.³⁴ This refers to the gap in technology, education and infrastructure needed for use of information technology which separates the 'developed' countries with wealth from the 'undeveloped' countries. Given that the wealth of the Third World, in the form of raw materials or persons, has been steadily drained away by colonial and capitalist expansion in the modern era, distributive justice requires more of us than wondering when to upgrade next. As persons committed to universal human rights which cut across the boundaries of nation, economics, sex, cultural and religious differences, we must be

pro-active in the effort to make access a reality for all. The Internet has the power to give voice to those who have been denied the most basic acknowledgments of their right to exist in peace. Some of the People of the Book have become People of the Web: like the early missionaries who used Rome's roads to carry a message that would eventually overwhelm the Empire, we use the technologies of Western imperialism to envision a different world and spread that message wherever we may. And we *will* overcome! We will win these battles because we must: lives depend on it.

HUMAN RIGHTS SITES ON THE INTERNET

With Special Reference to Women and Girls

<http://www.inrfvvp.org> :International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan

<http://www.oneworld.net> One World Net: an excellent resource on IT in developing countries

<http://www.amnesty.org> Amnesty International

<http://www.madre.org>: Human rights concerns of women in Central and South America, as well as Palestine.

<http://www.sigi.org> The 'Sisterhood is Global' Website provides on-line training for teaching human rights concepts to poor women of various faiths and cultures around the world.

<http://rawa.hackmare.com/index.html> :RAWA, The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan

<http://www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/diana/> : The Bora Laskin Law Library at the University of Toronto maintains a comprehensive on-line library, Women's Human Rights Resources.

<http://www.utoronto.ca/wjudaism/index.html> : The *Women in Judaism* Cyberjournal, also housed by the University of Toronto, and existing *only* in cyberspace, not only publishes on feminist and human rights issues in Judaism but provides a set of links to projects which bring Israeli, Jewish and Palestinian women together to work for peace.

<http://www.neww.org/> : NEWW, the Network of East-West Women, addresses the special concerns of women and girls from the former republics of the Soviet Union

¹ M. T. Whyte, *The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978). Although women have lower status in the cultures who follow the religions of the Book, the researcher feels this is not *necessarily* to be related to the teachings and practice of those religions, but may in fact reflect that those societies tend to be more formally organized, hierarchical and stratified, situations in which women and children fare less well.

² 'Biocentric Pluralism refers to the ethical position that just like individual living entities, ecosystems and species can be benefited or harmed, and therefore have an ideal 'good' which inheres for them. Hence, they are moral subjects, capable of having interests and rights (James P. Sterba, *Three Challenges to Ethics: Environmentalism, Feminism, and Multiculturalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 29-31. From the point of view of this ethical framework, the claim of the human species to be superior to other species becomes unsupportable.

³ Jack Donnelly, *The Concept of Human Rights* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), pp. 11-44. Donnelly concludes that Human Rights are rights every human has just by being born human. Martin E. Marty, 'Religious Dimensions of Human Rights', in John Witte, Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), pp. 1-16; Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 16-20.

⁴ Sterba, *Challenges*, pp. 27-49, 77-103; Donnelly, *Concept*, pp. 80-88; Perry, *Idea*, pp. 87-106.

⁵ George D. Chryssides, *The Elements of Unitarianism* (Boston: Element, 1998), p. 51.

⁶ Perry, *Idea*, pp. 11-42, among others.

⁷ *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁸ Perry, *Idea*, pp. 16-20.

9. For many feminists, this male-exclusive way of imaging the Creator presents serious problems, both in theory and practice.

¹⁰ See Perry, *Idea*, pp. 11-42, 57-86.

¹¹ Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socioliterary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

¹² Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

¹³ See John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998). See also James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

¹⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961).

¹⁵ An excellent discussion of Quranic exegesis and the role of ahadith may be found in Asma Barlas, *'Believing Women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2002), pp. 42-50.

¹⁶ Carole R. Fontaine, >AA Heifer from Thy Stable@: On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East=, reprinted in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 159-78.

¹⁷ Extensive research has been done on this topic, and cannot be detailed here. I refer readers to the following 'classics': Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, 2 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1993; 1994); and the many volumes of *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (1st Series), ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-), especially *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, Strategies*, (2nd Series), ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Helmut Koester and Thomas O. Lambdin, >The Gospel of Thomas (II,2)= in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 130.

¹⁹ Here I follow the work of Muslim feminist theologian Riffat Hassan (*Women=s Rights and Islam: From the I.C.P.D. to Beijing* (forthcoming); >Religious Human Rights and the Qur=an=, in *Religious Human Rights in the World Today* (Emory International Law Review, 10 (1996), pp. 85-96; plus a forthcoming chapter in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Through Her Eyes: Women=s Perspectives on World Religions* (Westview Press, in press).

²⁰ In part, this has occurred because of the introduction of misogynist 'less reliable' or 'weak' ahadith into normative collections during the 11th century—long after the canon of reliable ahadith had been closed (Barlas, *Women*, p. 45 et passim).

²¹ See the multivolume set, *The Earth Bible*, ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (New York: Pilgrim Press with Sheffield Academic Press, 2001--).

²² Quoted in Tom Own-Towle, *Living the Interdependent Web: An Adult Series on Unitarian Universalist Principles* (What Unitarian Universalists Believe: Living Principles for a Living Faith; Boston: Unitarian Universalist Denominational Grants Panel, 1987), p. 3.

²³ Ian Brownlie (ed.), *Basic Documents on Human Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 106. For a discussion of Christian influence on the formulation of the UN Declaration, see Robert Traer, *Faith in Human Rights: Support in Religious Traditions for a Global Struggle* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), pp. 173-87.

²⁴ Brownlie, *Documents.*, p. 107.

²⁵ *Idem.*, p. 107.

²⁶ See Warren R. Ross, 'After 15 Years, Our Principles and Purposes Provide Glue for UUs', *UU World*, Nov/Dec 2000 (<http://www.uua.org/world/1100feat3.html>) and Lex Crane, 'Some Assumptions Underlying the Seven Principles', *UU World*, Nov/Dec 2000 (<http://www.uua.org/world/1100sidebar3a.html>).

²⁷ Owen-Towle, *Living*, pp. 3-4.

²⁸ That is, in concise form.

²⁹ Through right belief, one is >saved= for eternal life in the afterlife, making this world=s problems of less critical importance to the committed believer.

³⁰ >Abdullah Yusuf >Ali, *The Holy Qur=an* (Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989).

³¹ Alan W. Gomes, *Unitarian Universalism* (Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), p. 80.

³² *Idem.*, p. 82.

³³ John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church, *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 41-55.

³⁴. See the website of Oneworld.net for discussion of various initiatives to overcome this problem. United Nations projects to address this are discussed by Jim Krane, 'Microsoft, HP Join UN Tech Effort', AP, 6/18/02 (<http://apnews.excite.com/article/20020618/D7K7E1A80.html>).