

Genealogy of the Seven Principles
Rev. Richard Trudeau

This is how the Unitarians were describing themselves right before the consolidation with the Universalists in 1961.

Purposes and Objectives of the AUA
(revised 1959; roots, 1894)

SECTION I. In accordance with its charter, the American Unitarian Association shall “be devoted to moral, religious, educational and charitable purposes.” In accordance with these purposes the American Unitarian Association shall:

1. Diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of religion which Jesus taught as love to God and love to man;
2. Strengthen the churches and fellowships which unite in the Association for more and better work for the Kingdom of God;
3. Organize new churches and fellowships for the extension of Unitarianism in our own countries and in other lands; and
4. Encourage sympathy and cooperation among religious liberals at home and abroad.

SECTION II. The Association recognizes that its constituency is congregational in polity and that individual freedom of belief is inherent in the Unitarian tradition. Nothing in these purposes shall be construed as an authoritative test.

--AUA Annual Report, 1959-60

One thing that strikes me is how little this says, when you compare it to our current list of seven principles, six sources, and more. The reason is that this statement was produced to heal a schism. It is anti-schismatic: it wants to set a bar that is very low, making the tent as big as possible.

Let me tell you about the schism. When the original American Unitarian Association (AUA) was formed in 1825, it was an organization of

individuals, not of congregations. It did not correspond to the UUA; it was something like UUs for a Just Economic Community, or UUs for Jewish Awareness, or another of those many groups we have. The Unitarians did not have an organization of congregations until 1865, when they formed the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches. It is clear from the name that the majority of Unitarians thought of themselves as a kind of Christian. But there were, in the middle of the 19th century, people we would today call humanists, and humanist congregations; and just two years after the formation of the National Conference, about two dozen congregations seceded and formed the Free Religious Association. This schism lasted for a quarter-century.

The schism ended in the early 1890s, when the three Unitarian organizations combined into a single organization of congregations--individual membership was phased out--and took the name of the oldest: the American Unitarian Association. So the AUA became an organization of churches, and adopted, in substance, the statement whose 1959 version I quoted above. The Christian majority was mollified because of the references to Jesus and God (in 1), and to the Kingdom of God (in 2). And the humanists were mollified, too. Reading closely, they could see that the term "religion" in 1 was undefined, with Jesus' definition offered as only an example that didn't require them to accept Christian ideas. And they could accept the mention of "Kingdom of God" in 2 because some biblical scholars were saying that on Jesus' lips that expression referred not to an afterlife or anything supernatural, but to a vision Jesus had of what this world could be like if there were peace and justice and enough to go around.

One other thing that strikes me about the 1959 Unitarian statement is that it makes no mention of what I will call the Unitarian taproot--the original religious concern of American Unitarianism: *salvation by character*. Let me tell you about that.

The European Unitarians in general, and the English Unitarians in particular, were not, in my opinion, so much our religious ancestors as our religious cousins. For the English Unitarians the central concern was to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, making the name "Unitarian" appropriate. But the religious liberals who around 1800 emerged from the Puritan-heritage churches in New England were named by their opponents, who said in effect, "Oh, you're just like those Unitarians," referring to the group in England. The American liberals accepted the name, because they did have doubts about the Trinity; but their central concern was to deny Predestination--the Calvinist doctrine which says that before we are born, God has already decided whether we are going to heaven or hell, and there's nothing we can do to change God's decision. The American Unitarians said, in effect, "That's so unfair. We don't believe in a God like that--a tyrant whose whim seals a person's fate. We believe that each person has the power to earn their salvation by living a life of high moral character." They summarized this line of thought in the slogan, *salvation by character*. Not, *God is one. Salvation by character*.

It's not surprising that there's no mention of *salvation by character* in the Unitarian statement, because the term "salvation" would have been radioactive to humanists. And though I think the Unitarians could have included much of the substance of *salvation by character* in language that would have been acceptable to everyone--for example, "the dignity of each person"--the fact is that they did not.

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Here is how the Universalists were describing themselves right before consolidation. The numbers are mine.

Universalist Declaration of Faith
(1935; revised 1953)

We avow our faith in:

- [1] God as eternal and all-conquering love;
- [2] the spiritual leadership of Jesus;
- [3] the supreme worth of every human personality;
- [4] the authority of truth, known or to be known; and
- [5] the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.
- [6] Neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a credal test.

--1953 General Assembly, Andover, Mass.

This is another anti-schismatic statement. Universalists were challenged by humanists, too--not so much in the 19th century, but early in the 20th (for which the term "humanist" is correct). There was no schism, but Universalists had experienced one in the 1830s, and they had no taste for another; plus, they saw what had happened to the Unitarians. Many of the leaders appreciated what the humanists were saying, but at the same time felt that Universalists had spent 150 years developing a very liberal form of Christianity, and they didn't want to give that up.

The resulting statement is a synthesis of liberal Christianity and humanism. Points 1, 2, and 5 proclaim liberal Christianity, while points 3, 4, and 6 are humanistic. The majority of Universalists saw themselves as a kind of Christian, and were satisfied by the references to God, Jesus, and the Kingdom of God. Humanists were satisfied, too. Looking at 1, they thought, "If what is meant by 'God' is love, there's no problem, for love certainly exists." Looking at 2, they agreed that the man Jesus was certainly a spiritual leader, and worthy of respect; and looking at 5, they understood the Kingdom of God to be Jesus' vision of how this world could become.

The Universalists were more successful at including a version of their taproot. Their central concern was, of course, to proclaim universal salvation: everyone goes to heaven; God somehow finds a way to save everybody, even Hitler; no one goes to hell. They couldn't say "no one goes to hell" if they wanted to satisfy humanists, but they could say something very close, and this is point 3, which says in effect: no one deserves hell.

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In 1961 the two groups got married, and produced this description of their union. The underlining is mine.

Principles & Purposes of the UUA (1961)

The members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;
2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.

--"The Six Principles," Warren Ross, *UUWorld*, Nov.-Dec. 2000

The 1985 revision of this into our current Principles & Purposes was motivated in part by a desire to remove the gendered language. Another motive was to add a principle that would express concern for the environment; my understanding is that it was Rev. Paul L'Herrou who suggested the wording of our resulting 7th Principle.

The first part of #2 (before the comma) is an innovation. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists had been investigating world religions since at least the 1820s, but had never said so in a denominational statement; at last, this practice is acknowledged here.

In the current (1985) Principles & Purposes of the UUA, #2 has been removed from the list of Principles and expanded into the list of Sources. It was Rev. Harry Hoehler of the UU congregation in Weston, Massachusetts who suggested doing so; though a Christian himself, he saw that continuing to single out the Judeo-Christian tradition in the list of Principles would cause needless controversy.

In 1961, the phrases free faith (line 2) and liberal religion (end of #5) were well-understood to mean what one of my seminary professors meant when he said that Unitarianism and Universalism were "religious manifestations of the Enlightenment." UUism is the result of applying Enlightenment values--reason, evidence, free expression, the right of conscience, democracy, etc.--to religion.

The free and disciplined search for truth in #1 has become our current 4th Principle: "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Much has been made lately of the word "responsible." In the 1961 statement "disciplined" meant "intellectually rigorous." Some have suggested to me that the change to "responsible" in 1985 reflected an attempt to introduce an ethical dimension. While this may be so, there was no thought whatever, as some assert today, that "responsible"

implies than one's search for truth should be pursued with an eye to the wishes, or feelings, of outside observers.

The language at the beginning of #3--"affirm ... and promote"--is used at the beginning of our current Principles & Purposes. I have underlined the three parts of #3 that come afterward. The first, the supreme worth of every human personality, lifted directly from the 1953 Universalist statement, expresses, in humanist language, the Universalist taproot. The second, the dignity of man, expresses in humanist language the Unitarian taproot. In our current 1st Principle, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," these have been combined, making our 1st Principle a concise statement of the most important parts of our religious heritage.

Our current 5th Principle, "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," derives from the last underlining in #3 and the right of conscience that is implied by the phrases free faith and liberal religion, as mentioned above.

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Here are our current Principles, unchanged since 1985. (Later revisions were confined to the Sources and guarantees of non-discrimination.) I have added the numbers and underlining.

Principles & Purposes of the UUA
(1985; revised 1995)

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian
Universalist Association, covenant to affirm
and promote

[1] the inherent worth and dignity of every person;

[2] justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

- [3] acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- [4] a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- [5] the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- [6] the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- [7] respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

--Bylaws of the UUA

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Since this essay originated as preparation for a UUMUAC event, held February 6, 2021, titled "The Struggle for Unitarian Universalism: Defending Our Seven Principles," let me end with the observation that the 1st, 4th, and 5th Principles are under attack by the UU national leadership. This is why those three are underlined above, and why I underlined corresponding parts of the 1961 UUA statement.

That the 1st Principle is under attack is clear from the following excerpt from the 2018-2022 Congregational Study Action Issue: Undoing Intersectional White Supremacy. While CSAIs come up from the grassroots, they do not see the light of day unless approved by the UUA Board of Trustees.

*Decentering whiteness calls us to
decenter individual dignity
for our collective liberation.*

(<https://www.uua.org/action/process/csais/undoing-intersectional-white-supremacy/2018-2022-csai-undoing-intersectional>)

That the 4th Principle, and Enlightenment values in general, are under attack is clear from this excerpt from a letter, signed by more than 300 "white ministers" within 24 hours of the initial distribution (June 21, 2019) of Rev. Todd Eklof's book *The Gadfly Papers*. Ultimately more than 500 signed.

*We recognize that a zealous
commitment to "logic" and "reason"
over all other forms of knowing
is one of the foundational
stones of White Supremacy Culture.*

(<https://www.muusja.org/reprint-an-open-letter-from-white-uu-ministers>)

That the 5th Principle is under attack is clear from the behavior of the UUA Board of Trustees over the last decade or so. Around 2007 the Board appointed a Fifth Principle Task Force to investigate concerns that General Assembly (GA) is not very democratic. The primary conclusion of the resulting report, issued in 2009, was that

GA is not really democratic.

(for the full report, type "Fifth Principle Task Force"
into the search box at www.uua.org)

Today the UUA is even less democratic. In 2012 the admitted unwieldy UUA Board of about 25 Trustees, most of whom represented specific geographic areas, was reduced to about 12 who are all elected at-large. With no Trustee having a specific constituency, it has become so difficult to be elected Trustee that since 2012 no candidate for Trustee (candidates are chosen by a Nominating Committee) has been opposed. In other words, not a single Trustee serving today has been elected.

A final attack comes in the form of a proposed 8th Principle.

*[8] Journeying toward spiritual wholeness
by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community*

by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

(proposed by the 2017 General Assembly)

This unwieldy statement (1) is not a principle, (2) is implied by the existing principles, (3) smuggles in terms from Critical Race Theory that are not widely understood (like "accountably" and even "racism"), and (4) would make the Principles less inclusive than they are at present by requiring everyone to prioritize racism over other concerns.