

Unitarian Universalist Principles and Enlightenment Humanism

by John Richard Felton

To appraise consequences, we need to develop criteria by which we can evaluate those consequences. What is the nature of the good in human relationships? What kind of constitution should govern the way individuals relate to one another in society? We UUs have provided answers to these questions by adopting seven principles by which we endeavor to judge the propriety of alternative courses of conduct. As to the source of these principles, our tradition nominally draws upon the direct experience of mystery and wonder, the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings, and earth centered traditions. It is my thesis that, whatever may be the contribution of these sources to our individual theologies, only humanist teachings, whose origins we associate with the Enlightenment, have constituted a significant source of our collective ethical principles.

Every issue of the *UU World*, the journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), sets forth the seven principles which the member congregations covenant to affirm and promote. They include the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the independent web of all existence of which we are a part.

As a Unitarian Universalist of long standing, I have recently come to wonder why the history of our movement dwells so exclusively on our theological heresies and our ultimate divorce from liberal Christianity at the neglect of the source of our values. By this I do not mean the process by which the UUA adopted our principles, but the intellectual milieu out of which they arose. To examine that source is the task of this essay.

Religions characteristically embody two separate and distinct elements: theology, relating to the existence and nature of the deity, and ethics, concerning moral teachings. In theology, Judaism and Islam are monotheistic, as is Christianity, to the extent that monotheism can be reconciled with Trinitarianism. As for their moral teachings, these religions historically expounded a formalistic ethic. By that I mean that they taught that God set forth ethical imperatives in a series of "thou shalt's" or "thou shalt not's." A familiar example is God's tendering the Ten Commandments to Moses. The Catholic Church provides another example in the doctrine of papal infallibility, not only in matters of faith but also in morals.

Unitarian Universalism would appear to differ from the world's major religions both with respect to theology and ethics. The absence of a creed in our congregations precludes any binding theological pronouncement on the part of the UUA. In UU congregations, theology is personal, not institutional. Thus, it is of crucial importance that church leaders emphasize that, when they are engaged in theological speculation, they are speaking as individuals, not *ex*

cathedra.

As for our ethical teachings, philosophers would characterize them as “teleological,” rather than formalistic. Instead of promulgating a series of positive and negative strictures as to the nature of right conduct, UUs believe that actions should be judged by their consequences. Since, however, the consequences of our actions almost always involve others, the ethical teachings of Unitarian Universalism tend to stress the impact of our actions upon the larger community of which we are a part, rather than whether our actions are consistent with our individual salvation. To appraise consequences, we need to develop criteria by which we can evaluate those consequences. What is the nature of the good in human relationships? What kind of constitution should govern the way individuals relate to one another in society?

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There is some disagreement as to the era to which we should apply the term “Enlightenment.” Some authorities would confine it to the 17th century; others, the 18th; some, both; and still others consider it an ongoing phenomenon. However we resolve this issue, we can concede that precursors of post-Reformation humanism can be found in pre-Christian Greece. The prevailing world view of that period, nonetheless, militated against the development of a systematic body of thought that could be called “humanistic.” It is true that Protagoras declared that “man is the measure of all things,” but that can best be interpreted as an expression of the anthropocentrism implicit in the geocentric universe of the Greek astronomer Hipparchus (which today we associate with Ptolemy).

We can also point to the difference in epistemological orientation between early Greek and Enlightenment thought. Notwithstanding the scientific observations of Hipparchus and his fellow astronomers, rationalism, rather than empiricism, was the prevailing mode of truth-seeking in ancient Greece. Thus, Archimedes’ experiment in which he immersed the king’s crown and an equal weight of pure gold to determine whether the goldsmith who fashioned the crown had debased it with a metal of lower density (he had) stands out as an anomaly. Much more common was Aristotle’s assurance that women had fewer teeth than men!

The evolution of Unitarian Universalist theology is familiar to most of us. Suffice it to say that, on the ground that Trinitarianism lacked scriptural support, Unitarianism constituted a rejection of the doctrine that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were of the same essence as God. As for Universalism, it renounced another Christian doctrine, eternal torment in Hell, on the ground that ever-lasting punishment was inconsistent with a loving God.

Notwithstanding these heresies, both Unitarians and Universalists continued for many years to consider themselves Christians. Once these movements dispensed with a creed, however, it was impossible for them to maintain indefinitely a Christian identity. The absence of a creed is clearly an invitation to theological diversity, and Unitarianism and Universalism became the home of believers and unbelievers of all sorts.

But an account of Unitarianism and Universalism which relates merely to their rejection of the divinity of Jesus and of the consignment of a large portion of humanity to permanent

residence in Hell is most certainly an inadequate description of modern Unitarian Universalism. The fact that we impose no creed, no theological position to which our members must subscribe, may be laudatory, but it is still a negative attribute. What is important in our religious enterprise is that we profess a common set of values that have no necessary relation to our individual theologies. One may be a theist, pantheist, panentheist, deist, agnostic, or atheist and still embrace our seven principles.

A Unitarian Universalist survey of some 8,000 members several years ago posed the question: “What is the ‘glue’ that binds individual UUs and congregations together.” More than half (52.1 percent) responded “shared values and principles.”¹ Of the five possible alternatives, this answer was either the first or second choice of every respondent irrespective of theological persuasion.

It should not be surprising that adherents to Unitarian Universalism can embrace the same ethical principles without regard to their theological differences. The reason has to do with the relationship of God to the good. There is an old philosophic question to the effect: Is something good because God says it’s good, or does He say it is good because it is good? If God determines the good, then the good is arbitrary, and He could just as well have made murder good. If, on the other hand, the good is independent of God, then God’s existence or non-existence has no relevance to the nature of the good. Ethical principles, in this view, are strictly human constructs whose content depends upon whether one accepts a formalistic ethic dictated by a religious institution or a teleological ethic based on humanist teachings. Let us turn to that issue.

From the time the church announced the doctrine of the Trinity in 375 C.E. and for the next one thousand years, virtually all aspects of culture in western Europe, including ethics, were dominated by the Catholic Church. Not only was there no separation of church and state, the authority of the church was transcendent.

The first stirrings of revolt against the hegemony of the church occurred in Italy in what came to be known as the Renaissance. This revolution was quite modest in scope and intensity, but it did manifest itself in science, art, literature, and education. Galileo and Leonardo de Vinci argued for observation and experimentation as against theological speculation as a source of truth about the external world. As for painting and sculpture, while religious themes still dominated, representations of temporal rulers and other objects became more common. In the literary realm, there was a great classical revival; Greek and Roman writers of the pre-Christian era achieved a new popularity. Finally, the invention of the printing press ended the virtual monopoly which the church had over education, and universities appeared and flourished throughout western Europe.

The Reformation, which had its inception with Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, was, of course, an even more serious challenge to the universality of Roman Catholicism. One of the practices which most offended Luther was the granting of indulgences, as they were called. In Luther’s colorful prose: “If one had ravished the Virgin Mary, or crucified Christ anew, the pope would, for money, have pardoned him.”²

Admittedly, most of the early Protestant leaders were no more liberal theologically than Catholic popes and cardinals. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., sagely observed: “The Pope put his feet on the neck of kings, but Calvin and his cohorts crushed the whole human race under their heels in the name of the Lord of Hosts.”³

Nevertheless, the insistence of Luther and other Protestant leaders that the Catholic hierarchy had no special competence to interpret the Bible did lead, as a result of the law of

unintended consequences, to the ultimate separation of church and state in western Europe. The multiplication of sects posed real obstacles for any one of them to secure such a preferred position in the nation that it could suppress all competing religions. So, it was not so much religious tolerance as religious impotence in the face of competing dogmas that eventually freed secular institutions from religious domination.

The culmination of the trend from theocratic to human values was the Enlightenment, which can be said to date from the 17th century. According to Richard Hooker, the main features of Enlightenment thought were an emphasis on rationality; empiricism; the applicability of scientific methods to any understanding of individuals and society, as well as the natural world: and the possibility of improving humankind through education.⁴

While Hooker does call attention to the relationship between 17th century thought and one of our seven principles, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” his summary is not complete. The incompleteness stems from his rather exclusive association of the Enlightenment with what was known at the time as “natural philosophy,” as distinct from “moral philosophy,” a category in which we would include not merely ethics but the social sciences, as well. So, while it is true that the 17th century witnessed a substitution of empiricism for revelation and *a priori* reasoning, it also encompassed a revolution in ethical thought.

Thomas Zengotita addressed the ethics of the Enlightenment in a recent article in *Harper's*. He maintains that it is “unusual [for people] to extend their sense of self to encompass multitudes of strangers [but] such an identification with all humanity and each human being is rooted in the ideals of Enlightenment humanism.”⁵

To appreciate the relationship of Enlightenment ethics to UU principles we need to understand that these ethical insights were not the product of any single individual, nor did they appear simultaneously. I should, however, be inclined to begin with Thomas Hobbes, a 17th century political philosopher. His most important work, *Leviathan*, published in 1651, revealed a rather dark opinion of human nature. He maintained that “our naturall Passions... carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the Like.”⁶ As a consequence, in the absence of external constraint, that is law, “the life of man is solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷

So, it is self interest, according to Hobbes, that induces individuals to enter into a “social contract” in which they agree to abide by the dictates of society in return for protection against the deprivations of others. Contracts require enforcement however, and Hobbes envisions the king as the person in whom is invested the authority to execute the law of the land.

What is novel about Hobbes' system is that he rejects the prevailing doctrine that kings govern by “divine right.” Rather than as a consequence of divine dispensation, kings reign pursuant to the consent of the governed. So, we can acknowledge Hobbes' contribution to our principles by his contention that people freely enter into a social contract in order to achieve the UU principle of “justice in human relations.”

Let us turn next to John Locke, who exerted such a profound influence on our country's founding fathers. He was persuaded that the human mind is a *tabula rasa*, a kind of blank page, upon which experience writes.⁸ Individual differences, therefore, are a product of the environment, that is, the varied experiences to which each individual is subject. It follows that individuals are identical with respect to inherent potential. As a consequence, Locke, unlike Hobbes, considered monarchy to be an unnatural development, contrary to the fundamental equality of all people. So Locke emphasized another UU principle, “the use of the democratic process” as a crucial expression of human equality.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose pen, according to Lord Acton, had greater impact than any

one who ever lived, devoted an entire volume to *The Social Contract*. In it he declared: “If we ask what precisely consists of the greatest good of all... we shall find it reduces itself to two main objects, liberty and equality.” Rousseau then proceeded to elaborate:

By equality, we should understand, not that degrees of power and riches are to be absolutely identical for everybody, but that power shall never be so strong as to be capable of violence and shall always be exercised by virtue of rank and law, and that, in respect to riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none shall be poor enough to be forced to sell himself.⁹

Rousseau’s views may seem quite moderate in today’s world. In 18th century France, however, this was the kind of intellectual tinder which could feed the fires of the French Revolution. Rousseau’s conception of the good as being comprised of equality and liberty translates into the UU principles of “the inherent worth and dignity” of every person” as an aspect of equality and “the right of conscience” as a vital element in human liberty.

The utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham was even more explicitly founded on the assumption of human equality. In his words: “The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.”¹⁰ In what he called the “hedonistic calculus,” each one should count for one and no more than one in determining the greatest good. What could more clearly express the UU principle of the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large? Since Bentham also maintained that all punishment was evil, he was subscribing to the UU principle as to the “inherent... dignity of every person.”

While majority rule is preferable to minority rule, Benthamite utilitarianism, to my mind, is nonetheless consistent with the tyranny of the majority. Thus, I should be inclined to rephrase Bentham’s dictum to read “the greatest good for all.”

Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist and sociologist of the 19th century, avoided the problem of majoritarian tyranny by maintaining that an act could be deemed to be in accordance with the principle of social justice only if at least one person was better off and no one was worse off. Certainly this is in accord with the principle of “the inherent worth... of every person.” Nevertheless, while Pareto’s methodology enabled him to avoid the problem of interpersonal comparisons of welfare, it cannot distinguish between a situation in which it is Bill Gates or a hungry, homeless person who is made better off by the act in question!

No one, perhaps, has had a more pervasive influence on Unitarian Universalism than Charles Darwin, who was himself a Unitarian. The evolutionary process is clearly inconsistent with the then prevailing view that humankind is the product of special creation. Thus, evolution dealt a blow to theologies which would divorce *homo sapiens* from all other species.

We are concerned at the moment, however, with the impact of Darwinism on ethics, not theology. It is my view that evolution is not merely a scientific proposition, but also a reminder that we have a kinship with all living things or, as our UU principles would have it, “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

The UU “goal of world community” was not a principle which was prominent in the writings of Enlightenment humanists prior to World War I. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, the nation-state was hailed as the successor to a feudal system characterized by serfdom and perpetually warring factions. Centralization of authority, first in a monarch and later in elected representatives, brought freedom and order to an extent not previously achieved.

The carnage inflicted during the First World War led many humanists to conclude that

only a supra-national government could insure against future international conflicts on an even more catastrophic scale. Representative of this group was Bertrand Russell who maintained:

When all the armed forces of the world are controlled by one world-wide authority, we shall have reached the state in the relation of states which was reached centuries ago in the relation of individuals. Nothing less than this will suffice.¹¹

Last, I want to comment on the work of the late John Rawls. In his *Theory of Justice*, he asks us to imagine a group of individuals assigned the task of drafting a constitution for a society without any advance knowledge of each one's subsequent position in that society. Thus, if I, as a member of such a constitutional convention opted for a society in which rewards were distributed very unequally, I might be one of those who ended up disabled, incompetent, friendless, and in want.

It is Rawls' contention that, if individuals were indeed confronted by such a "veil of ignorance," as he calls it, they would choose a system which maximized the rewards to the least-advantaged member of the group. The most general statement of his conception of justice is: "All social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth—and the bases of self respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to every one's advantage."¹² Is not that a call for "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations"? I do not know how it could be otherwise.

If it is not apparent how an unequal distribution of social values could be to every one's advantage, there is a ready example in the economic realm. Income tax rates could be so high that they induce many people to avoid market transactions by engaging in direct production and barter, with the economic inefficiencies attendant thereto. High income tax rates also provide an incentive for sellers to operate on a cash-only basis and neglect to report some portion of their income at tax time.

Admittedly, the United States is currently rather far removed from a situation in which marginal tax rates are so steep as to constitute a significant deterrent to economic efficiency. On the other hand, some European countries in which taxes absorb twice as much of the national income as in the United States may well have reached this point.

There is one of our principles which I have so far not related to the Enlightenment, namely, "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." While "acceptance of one another" is, perhaps, implicit in the principle of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," the word "spiritual" is not one which we associate with the Enlightenment. I attribute this to the fact that Enlightenment thinkers regarded the spiritual as somehow contrary to the material, the natural, and the temporal. Under any circumstances, there is no common understanding as to the meaning of the concept, so it fails the test of communicating one's thoughts.

We can, however, interpret "spiritual" in such a way as to reconcile it with Enlightenment humanism. Let us define it as "the sentiments evoked by humanistic teachings." These sentiments are our emotional responses to perceived injustice in the world and to beauty in words, music, and art forms. These reactions are implicit to humanism with its emphasis on the natural world and its denizens, as opposed to pre-occupation with supernaturalism, sin, and salvation.

Finally, let us return to Thomas Zengotita who asks his readers why, if they are not

themselves the victims of injustice, do they even care about those who are? His response is that you care because you are imbued with Enlightenment principles. But what led you to make these principles so much a part of your very essence?

I am not certain of the answer, but it may be that our pride in objectivity and intellectual integrity will not permit us to engage in special pleading in behalf of our narrow self-interest. While this may be true, I think the answer goes deeper. As we age, the less important to us are things and the more important are people. We know that we can take neither our possessions nor our friends with us when we go, but I am convinced that most UUs would prefer that people remember us as kind, thoughtful, and caring rather than that we died owning lots of “stuff.” Certainly no amount of worldly goods would compensate me for departing this world believing that no one thought it diminished by my absence.

A remaining task is to consider what contribution to UU principles can be ascribed to sources other than humanist teachings. As for “Jewish and Christian teachings,” Enlightenment humanism was certainly a factor in the differentiation of these religions into fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist strains. Furthermore, when Judaism and Christianity ceased being monolithic, ethical formalism no longer characterized the teachings of some of their various branches.

Despite the humanistic influence on the more liberal Jewish and Christian denominations, however, their teachings tended to lag behind Unitarianism and Universalism on many issues of social justice. Unitarians and Universalists condemned slavery, advocated woman suffrage, supported civil rights legislation, and welcomed gays and lesbians long before most other denominations were prepared to do so. The point of this is that Jewish and Christian teachings can scarcely be said to be a source of UU ethical principles if they were laggard in support of the social application of them.

The only other world religion that appears to have exerted any significant influence on Unitarian Universalism is Buddhism. The influence here, however, seems to be more personal than social. The search for inner peace and serenity is a worthy endeavor, but it does not necessarily translate into the ethical principles enunciated by Unitarian Universalism.

Turning now to a brief discussion of the other putative sources of UU principles, the “direct experience of mystery and wonder,” however much it may be an appropriate response to the immensity of the universe and the beauty of various natural phenomena, such experience does not create ethical principles. By the same token, the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men” may inspire us to live by our principles, but they are not themselves such principles. Finally, while “earth-centered traditions” may resonate with UUs who have an abiding appreciation for the natural world, they may become “idolatries of the mind and spirit” against which humanist teaching warn us. Specifically, earth-centered traditions frequently personify the earth and treat it with veneration rather than a resource which we should husband wisely in order to avoid ecological and demographic disaster.

Let me leave you with some final thoughts. I believe that the Enlightenment made humanists of all who subscribe to Unitarian Universalist principles. Whether we are secular humanists or religious humanists, we prefer reason over superstition, equality over hierarchy, democracy over autocracy, caring over callousness, and peace over violence. That is the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Notes

1. Thomas Stites, "Diverse Theologies, Common Values," *UU World*, May-June, 1998, p. 36
2. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 1569 (translated by Hazlitt), CCCCLI, quoted in George Seldes, *Great Thoughts*, New York, Ballantine, 1996, p. 279
3. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., *The Poet at the Breakfast Table*, 1872, quoted in Seldes, *op. cit.*, p. 210
4. Richard Hooker, *Seventeenth Century Enlightenment Thought*, 1996, wsu.edu/~dee/ENLIGHT/PREPHIL.HTM, pp. 1-2
5. Thomas de Zengotita, "Common Ground: Finding Our Way Back to the Enlightenment," *Harper's*, January, 2003, p. 36
6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, New York, Dutton, 1950, p.139
7. *Ibid.*, p.104
8. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, New York, Dutton, undated, p.59
9. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1988, p. 59
10. Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1988, p. 5
11. Bertrand Russell, *Living Philosophies: A Series of Intimate Credos*, New York, Simon and Shuster, 1931, p. 18. (I have the distinction of having been a student in Russell's course in British Empiricism at UCLA in the spring of 1940.)
12. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 62