

Our UU “Source” Statement: It’s Time to Make a Good Thing Better!

There is much to admire in the current statement of Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes posted on the walls of so many of our houses of worship, on the backs of orders of service, and in other prominent places. I particularly appreciate the thoughtfulness of the section that lists and describes the many “sources of the living tradition we share.” The contents of this list are packed comfortably but also tightly, so tightly that it’s difficult to take them all in at a glance while viewing them through the lens we are accustomed to using:

- 1) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
- 2) Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
- 3) Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- 4) Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
- 5) Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*
- 6) Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.¹*

¹ This language is contained in the by-laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association as part of our statement of Principles, Purposes, and Sources, a full copy of which is appended to this document.

Whenever we take the time to unpack these words and sort them out a little, we are likely to notice something that we missed before. For example, there is the matter of *evil*. Religious liberals seem at times, in our eagerness to affirm every individual, to downplay the problem of evil in the world. Nevertheless, we do name it clearly where our second source statement affirms the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil”—the *evil* so often *structured* into collective entities such as Empire, Corporation, Party, State, or—sadly—sometimes even Church. Making a statement is hardly the same as mounting a campaign against the evils to which it alerts us, but it’s a good start. Only when we’ve named what we are confronting can we do so “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Sin is a term with which most liberals are even less comfortable than the word *evil*. We may therefore be surprised to discover that our fifth source statement warns us against a specific sin—called by its traditional name!—as it affirms “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” How can we affirm secular-sounding notions like Humanism, Reason, and Science while warning against a religious-sounding offense like “idolatry” in the same breath? How can we distinguish a “sin” except against a background of holy or religious imperatives?

The conscientious *humanism* affirmed by these words means that we refuse to regard as infinite, omnipotent, or eternal anything which is not so. Such humanism, far from being an arrogant attempt to substitute human beings for God, is an attitude of humble resistance to the practice of idolatry, of taking any material object or structure of the *mind and spirit* as a “god”. When idols are enshrined and their worship is enforced by “powers and structures” of human authority that claim divine sanction, Humanists are no less offended than was Moses when he found his people worshipping a golden calf!

We might have been less surprised to find language about idolatry in the fourth source of our living tradition: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” But look at the load this statement bears already: Judaism, Christianity, God, and Love! That’s a lot of weight to carry, and this statement carries it brilliantly.

Notice how precise these words are: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” They do not speak of embracing any so-called Jewish or Christian teachings that call us to do otherwise than *loving our neighbors as ourselves*. Such teachings can surely be found embedded in powers and structures associated with these traditions, and many “neighbors” over many centuries have suffered as a result. But surely such teachings are false to

anything that can be called “God’s love.” We affirm with our Universalist forbears, that, if there is any God to speak of, this God *loves*—forever, all.

How clearly these words affirm teachings about the love of God and neighbor while not presuming to tell us whether God exists or not! What a masterpiece of economy, and of sensitivity to the feelings of people who seek the solid ground of fellowship with each other while maintaining a strong connection to Jewish or Christian roots; or to their hard-fought Humanist (or even atheist!) positions. If we are to increase the load this statement already bears with such gentle dignity and authority, we must also allow it to get somewhat bigger. That is exactly the change that I am about to propose. The time has come for this very good statement to grow, and for us to grow along with it. It’s time to make a good thing better.

Why? What is it that has changed?

We are now aware that there are not two but three major traditions in the religious “family” that includes Judaism and Christianity. The third, of course, is Islam. Muslims speak of these three faith traditions as the religious family of Abraham, to remind us that all Bible heroes, such as Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus, are heroes to Muslims as well. Islam raises the same cry for justice and peace, the same cry against *idolatry* and the *powers and structures of evil*, that we hear in Jewish, Christian, and Humanist teachings.

The problem is that while our current source statement invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse, it does not extend this invitation to Muslims as well. This is remarkable, given that the term “Islam” draws our attention not only to a set of texts and teachings, but also to nearly one-quarter of the world’s people and the third largest faith community in North America today.²

This statement, posted in so many places where newcomers are apt to find it, warmly welcomes people who approach life from a wide range of religious viewpoints. It is a reminder that to join with us on the Unitarian Universalist journey is not a matter of “conversion,” but is instead a process of polishing the treasures we already carry with us from our home traditions while continuing to seek new ones on our own path. There is no requirement nor any suggestion that in order to be welcome among us a newcomer must first renounce his or her religious heritage. However, the fourth source statement as presently written does appear to extend a special welcome to some members of the religious “family of Abraham” but not to others!

Suppose that your own family has three members. Now imagine that you have received a beautiful hand-lettered invitation to participate in a great celebration, but it names only two of you without mentioning the third.

² This resembles the religious profile of most nations worldwide that have substantial Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist populations, such as England, India, and the Philippines. Muslims are the second largest faith community in all three.

Would you guess this omission to be a simple accident? Imagine that everything else about the invitation reflects a great deal of concern for and knowledge about you and your family. Might it not seem—at least to the one left off the list—that she or he had been pointedly *dis*-invited or excluded?

I am certain that this was not the intention of the good folks who have composed and refined the current Source statement. It was first drafted in response to needs and tensions within our own religious association, with eyes turned more inward than out towards the wider world. Islam had not yet claimed the attention of most Unitarian Universalists except as an exhibit in the museum of “world religions,” one of several collections of spiritual artworks and beautiful sayings. Islam was not yet a matter requiring the same intimate sensitivity afforded to fellow UU’s who continued—and still continue—to identify strongly with Jewish and Christian *teachings*. This situation has changed. There are now among us many members of Muslim heritage, and more will be coming. Do we welcome them? How? And how well?

We may think that Islam is “covered” by that third source statement about *wisdom from the world’s religions* but I want to suggest that “covering” is not what’s needed here, or now.³ Seeing how Jewish and

³ Some might ask, “Why not have a statement to explicitly recognize Buddhist teachings, which are important to many UUs (and also to many other non-Buddhists)?” The question suggests its own reply. Buddhism—like Hinduism, Taoism, and Shinto—is not confessional or covenantal in the way that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are usually

Christian teachings have been so conscientiously included, it may very well appear to an outsider or newcomer that Islamic teachings have been deliberately excluded from where they ought to be.

By acting now—openly, deliberately, and gladly—to expand our language to specifically include the teachings of Islam and persons of Muslim background, we will be working toward more than our own interior health and growth. We will be modeling a proactive approach that’s sorely needed in these times when non-Muslim response to Islam is characterized by a tendency to ignore or forget, interrupted occasionally by bursts of fear- and anger-driven reaction. In such a context, the best way to show others how to do things right is to take a deep breath and do it ourselves!

I do not recommend, nor would I think it wise, to simply add the word ‘Islamic’ to our current statement, next to the words ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian.’ That would be patchwork, just another kind of covering. Changes in human faithways cannot be entered into lightly, whether we are considering change in the practice of faith communities or changes in the written testaments of faith. Considering any change in the wording of such documents—by addition, subtraction, or substitution—will engage us at

understood to be. “Membership” in one Abrahamic faith community requires—or at least implies—*disaffiliation* from or *renunciation* of membership in any another. This is quite different from the situation in Japan, for example, where one might participate in both “Buddhist” and “Shinto” rites and celebrations, possibly without distinguishing between the two. The same can be said of “Hindu” and “Buddhist” observances in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (where earlier “animist” beliefs and practices also persist alongside these great historic, literate traditions.)

once in questions about the whole structure of faith; about its origins and its past; and about the future that is taking shape today.

We will need to ask: What is Islam besides a quick news bite during Ramadan or the Hajj, or a one-page Sunday feature in the newspaper? What do Islamic and UU approaches to questions of ultimate meaning and value have in common? Why did formal “Unitarian” thought first take shape in Southern and Eastern Europe, on the margins between Christian and Muslim lands, and why should that matter today? Are there some natural affinities to explore and build upon?

The new statement that comes out of this process of search and discovery must be the work of at least a committee and ultimately of our whole community, but let me suggest some possible wordings, just to help get the creative juices flowing. To augment “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves,” I present the following alternatives for consideration:

- **“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us to respond to God’s *compassion* and *mercy*⁴ by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**
- **“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us to rejoice in God’s *compassion* and *mercy* by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**
- **“Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices that call us to celebrate God’s *compassion* and *mercy* by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**

⁴ *Compassion, mercy*, and the phrase “*In the name of God*” echo key phrases of the Qur’an, as will be instantly recognized by readers of Muslim background.

- “Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices that call us—in the name of God—to be a joy and a blessing to our neighbors.”

These experimental statements retain the old one’s emphasis on *neighbors*. They highlight the desire for peaceful community so central to all of the Abrahamic traditions without suggesting that we accept the whole inventory of belief or practice from any one of them. They neither affirm nor dispute the existence of the God in whose *name* these traditions wish to speak, but applaud their earnest efforts to do so. The new words thus retain some of the poise (if not yet quite the polish) of the old. We may find other words that do it better, but the important thing is to do it, and do it now.⁵

Good timing carries a message twice as far and plants it twice as deep as one that’s spoken in haste, or too late. You may have noticed that along with “Islam,” I’ve slipped—in two versions—the word “joy” into our statement where it never was before. (In fact, our current Principles and Purposes statement includes no language of happiness or joy.) *If our message today isn’t one of joy redeemed from sorrow, why should anyone listen?*

Now may be the right time to address this omission as well!

⁵ Some colleagues who reviewed an earlier version of this proposal remarked that Islam has not been a “source” on par with Jewish and Christian teachings—steadily supplying textual material for use in Unitarian or Universalist sermons, etc.—until quite recently. For a different view on the relationship of Islam to early Unitarian (and other anti-Trinitarian) thinking and motivation, please see Dr. Susan Ritchie’s magisterial 2009 Minns Lectures series at http://www.minnslectures.org/archive/Ritchie/2009_series.php and her book Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam

A change in language may seem like a small thing to consider. But remember that a small change in your prescription for medicine, or your glasses, may make all the difference to your health, or your ability to see where you're going. It may be that by making room for Islam, proactively, at our own religious table, we will be daring to matter in a new way to the world. Not only for the money and good will we share through our many service projects: we will be daring to matter for the strength of our religious affirmation itself; for that joyously open vision of truth and service which is Unitarian Universalism.

Documents of faith, as much as they are descriptions of the world we see, are also lenses through which we see it. A lens needs to be polished frequently. From time to time, our prescription also needs to be updated. I propose that such a time has come.

Yours in fellowship,

Rev. Craig Moro

Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation

(I welcome all constructive comments and reflections on this proposal.

Please send them to: minister@weastuu.org)

UUA By-Laws

***Section C-2.1. Principles.**

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

- 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;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Section C-2.2. Purposes.

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

© Copyright 1996 - 2006 Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. All Rights Reserved.