

Some Reflections on Pluralism  
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Some of you may be thinking, “pluralism,” what’s that? Well, if you have been following the proposed changes to our UU Seven Principles than you may recall that pluralism is one of the six petals of the flower, with “love” as the center. The thinking behind the change from “Principles” to petals or covenantal values, is that our UU tradition is asking not only that we agree with a statement, but we also commit to action based on the statement. Would you agree with me that to follow a spiritual life is not only a matter of belief, but also a willingness to stand up for what you believe? So, what is pluralism? Why is it included in the Article II revision of our UUA bylaws? How is pluralism a spiritual value? What is being asked of us as UU’s in terms of pluralism? Can we commit to actions based on pluralism? These are the questions I will explore with you this morning.

There are two kinds of pluralism I am aware of, and I think both are worthy of our exploration this month. One kind is cultural pluralism. The other is what is called pluralism of theology or pluralism of religious belief. Both are part of a spiritual and ethical life.

Cultural pluralism is about promoting equality among different cultural groups, working towards regarding each group as equally valuable, and striving to make differences among groups appreciated and respected. Often within a society, there is one distinct primary culture. The practice of cultural pluralism tries to make room for those who are not part of that dominant culture. In a pluralistic society, people value the contributions of all its members as well as the norms of these different subcultures. An example of cultural pluralism is having an African American Studies program in a college curriculum. Cultural pluralism exists in a society that avoids trying to make people assimilate to the primary culture and instead encourages people to bring their culture’s own uniqueness and values to society. Thus, people who dress based on their cultural heritage are accepted equally as those dressed in western clothing.

Cultural pluralism is consistent with UU principles and values. We believe in equity, democracy, acceptance, peace, and respect for the interconnected web of existence. All these values which characterize our Seven Principles to me speak to pluralism, both cultural and religious. The proposed revision of our principles in the Article II Commission work of our UUA converts these principles into action statements. It lists pluralism as one of our 7 values. Here is the statement on pluralism in the draft revision:

We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

The importance of cultural pluralism in the current social and political environment in the USA cannot be overstated. White evangelical Christians, feeling besieged by other groups, have worked through our courts and state legislatures, as well as local school boards, to disallow, or at least diminish, the perspectives of others. You all know this. Laws have been enacted against teaching of the history of slavery, or teaching about alternative sexual identities and orientations. State legislatures including our own have disallowed diversity training. The war against women's reproductive rights is based in evangelical, white Christian teachings, imposing their views on others, and not showing respect for different views. To me this is a violation of the establishment clause of US Constitution. The government is not supposed to promote any one religion over another. It is also the antithesis of pluralism.

Theological pluralism allows for a diversity of views that are respected equally. As UU Rev. Loadman-Copeland puts it:

...a theology of pluralism should consider wholeness in diversity instead of unity in diversity. Here diversity is not just about coexistence. Wholeness recognizes the inherent beauty, worth, and dignity that arise from diversity. Not only is the whole greater than the sum of its parts, but the diversity of the parts enriches the whole. Instead of tolerance or accommodation, diversity is an essential and integral part of the whole.

Unitarian Universalism is the most pluralistic faith tradition I know of. And as we saw in the flower diagram it is a central value we are covenanted to practice.

In terms of religious or theological pluralism, the statement in the Article II revision of our Principles makes it clear where we UU's stand. We elevate learning from others. Many of you are familiar with our "Six Sources." The fact that UU's don't point to a single book as a source of a shared creed or belief says a lot about where we UU's stand. As a faith movement, UU's feel that there is wisdom in many sacred books. And we don't revere one teaching or source above others.

A couple of weeks ago Janet and I attended the Pacific West Regional assembly. The keynote event was a conversation between our UUA president Rev. Sofia Betancourt and United Church of Christ president Rev. Karen Georgia Thomson. Both addressed the erosion of pluralism in our country. White evangelical Christianity actually distorts the teachings of Jesus and seeks to gain power and control over other faiths especially liberal faith traditions. Betancourt and Thomson said that those of us in the liberal faith tradition must work individually, and collaboratively with those of like-minded orientation, to restore what our founding fathers provided in terms of liberty. The framers of the constitution intended that the federal government does not promote any religion above others or any faction above others.

I appreciate the approach to religious pluralism of nineteenth century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. In a famous sermon he declared that there are two categories of text in the Bible, what he called the “transient and the permanent.” Parker identified not the doctrines of traditional Christianity, but the pure religion of Jesus as permanent: “absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without ... hindrance.” Parker was stripping away the dogma in the Bible which can be divisive, to leave what he regarded as ethical principles that could more readily be agreed upon by followers of other religions. Parker was also emphasizing that we UU’s are guided by reason and are not blindly indiscriminate in how we approach theological diversity. When we are reasonable, we can engage in dialogue with reasonable people of other faiths. I think reason and logic are essential to discussions around theological pluralism.

Pluralism in fact was one of the most important elements that attracted me to UU. I left the religion of my childhood because, among other reasons, of its claim of exclusiveness and implied superiority. I was taught as a child, there is Jewish heaven that is available only to the true believers in the Jewish faith. (This is the Orthodox perspective. Most Jews reject this teaching.) There is a lesser heaven for non-Jews who led ethical lives, I was taught. I didn’t want to believe that the Jewish people were “chosen” by God above others. This kind of claim of exclusivity repelled me. I wanted to believe then and I still want to believe that we are all created equal, and that there are many worthy paths to a spiritual life. I understand that our current reality, both in the USA and much of the world, it is not widely accepted. But the striving for equality and for pluralism is a worthy goal for me. I don’t want to be part of a faith community that does not promote pluralism as a value. I applaud our UUA for elevating pluralism.

I think at its core, pluralism is an acknowledgement that I/we don’t possess ultimate truth regarding the deep theological questions that we all face as human beings. Nor is any one person or group so wise and advanced to be justified in declaring superiority. One of my takeaways from a college course in Introductory Anthropology was about the posture of the pioneers in the discipline of Anthropology who studied different cultures and religions from a bias of superiority. The alternatives to Christianity that were studied by early anthropologists were relegated to the status of “primitive religions.” Contemporary anthropologists do not use such language. Scholars and the rest of us have come to see great wisdom and worth in the so-called “nature religions,” as for example the Native American. It would be refreshing if our politics matched the progressiveness of academia.

To embrace pluralism means to me to accept that the perspectives and practices of others offer something to benefit from, something to teach. In my opinion it is also the only way to bridge the divides that exist today in our country and in the world. Of course, we must set some limits on our embrace of pluralism. We cannot, for example, accept cannibalism or human sacrifice. Nor can we blindly accept the politicized evangelical Christianity which seeks to dominate. We can and should exercise reason as a tool in approaching alternative religious perspectives.

To my mind, no UU has captured the idea of religious or theological pluralism better than the late Rev. Forrest Church in the imagery of what he termed the “Cathedral of the World:”

In the Cathedral of the World there are windows without number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through. Because the cathedral is so vast, our time so short, and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect upon the play of darkness and light through a few of its windows. Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning. A twenty-first-century theology based on the concept of one light and many windows offers its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only.

Last fall Janet and I traveled to Spain with Tim and Charlotte Belton. One of the cities we visited was Cordoba. Cordoba was known in the tenth and eleventh centuries as the “Ornament of the World.” At the time Cordoba was considered the most culturally refined city in Europe, and by some estimates, had the largest population of any city in Europe. It was a place where Moslems, who were largely in control, allowed Jews and Christians to practice their religions freely and to participate fully in society. It was a place where scholarship and the arts thrived. Unfortunately, this laboratory of pluralism did not survive more than two centuries. The Inquisition brought an end to this experiment as Ferdinand and Isabella strived to create a unified Spain with only the Roman Catholic religion allowed.

Jewish people held prominent positions in German society before WWI. But the Nazis sought to “purify” Europe by eliminating Jews and other minorities. And as you all know antisemitism has been surging again in the USA and in Europe. Denial of pluralism can lead to genocide and other forms of violence.

Krista Tippett is a role model on how to embrace theological pluralism. Her life has been dedicated to the exploration of meaning. The invited guests to her podcasts offer a variety, or I might say a “plurality” of perspectives. Krista regards wisdom not as a destination but rather a life-long journey of discovery, learning, and growth. Tippett engages in deep conversations with individuals who have dedicated their lives to exploring the fundamental questions regarding faith, meaning, and the pursuit of a life of purpose. In her Ware lecture at UU General Assembly in 2016 Tippett spoke of her interview with Black theologian Vincent Harding. Here is some of what she said about him and about pluralism:

Religion is ... a way of speaking about [the question of pluralism.] What is our purpose in this world and is that purpose related to our responsibilities to each other and to the world itself?

All of that seems to me to be a variety of languages, getting at the same reality.... Vincent Harding said, that we need again to recognize that, to develop the best humanity, the best spirit, the best community; There needs to be discipline [and] practices of exploring. How do you do that? How do we work together? How do we talk together in ways that will open up our best capacities and our best gifts?

The times we live in now seem to discourage seeking to understand a variety of viewpoints that differ from our own. Many Americans rely on social media that simply reinforce a viewpoint held tightly, and a tendency to regard anything different as evil or stupid. I was listening to a story on NPR about the closing of a coal power plant in Southern Wyoming. Many employees there were discounting the role of fossil fuels in contributing to global warming. Others referred to “the Greens” as stupid and ridiculous. Others said that the decline in coal usage that we see now will soon shift to an increased reliance on coal. Obviously, many of these people are uninformed or misinformed. They have relied on coal as their livelihood. Anxiety at the loss of a livelihood and a way of life may make it challenging for them to see the reality clearly. How do we engage with people with convictions that defy scientific and economic reality? This is the challenge of our age. I think pluralism should include the idea that we respect others as people even when we can't accept an irrational or destructive idea. And perhaps we can seek common ground regarding a need or value behind what we can't accept rationally or ethically. As an example of what I mean here, we can sympathize with the coal miners regarding the loss of a job and a way of life?

There are groups of people who seek to undermine democracy in our country because the democratic processes of elections and the courts have not given them enough power and control over society that they wish. How do we help to steer the process back towards respect for the rule of law and the rights of members of a diverse society.?

Anxiety may be at the root of the decline of democracy we are witnessing. The rise of dictators like Putin in Russia, Orban in Hungary, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Maduro in Venezuela, and the right-wing threats to democracy here, in France, Italy and elsewhere suggest that people around the world are afraid of change and afraid of immigrants. Choosing to distance from and deny the rights others will not decrease tension, but rather the opposite, because it prolongs the path to ultimate reconciliation. Nelson Mandela and MLK understood this. In the realm of culture and society, embracing and modeling pluralism is the only hope for peace in our country and in the world. We need to appeal to the needs of others who are drawn towards totalitarianism and show a better way forward. We take on this challenge because we know the very survival of humanity depends on it. We take this on because it is a part of our spiritual values and beliefs. We take this on because we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of others. We take this on because we embrace

the values of pluralism, interdependence and love. Our country and our world are at a tipping point. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to be promoters of pluralism.

Can we imagine a world where pluralism is the norm? A world where different perspectives are honored and where different groups work together for the common good of humanity? A world in which all strive to end wars, improve the well-being of all. The world I want our children and grandchildren to inherit is one where differences in culture and religion are not a barrier, but rather an opportunity for cooperation and enrichment. I ask you to consider what you can do alone and with others, to promote cultural and religious pluralism. May it be so.