

The 4th Principle of UUism

The subject of today's service is the 4th Unitarian Universalist principle. I struggled with this essay for a long time and must have rewritten it a dozen times. There are many ways to approach the subject. The only thing I was sure of was that I would not write a dreary, factual, chronological history of the 4th principle. In the end, I decided to make it personal.

What follows is a my reflection on the subject. I'm focusing mostly on the tension between science and religion. While I borrowed freely from others who think like I do, I'm sharing my personal thoughts, one Unitarian to another.

The fourth principle is "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." It's closely related to the third: "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." There are two key differences. One, the third principle focuses on the community, while the fourth focuses on the individual. The second difference is that the fourth principle uses the term "free and responsible search."

I love that term. I was previously Roman Catholic. Once following Sunday mass, I approached the priest to ask him a theological question. His immediate response was "Gee, I don't know, what do you think?" When he saw my surprise at his response he added "Look Mike, be your own theologian. Don't let anyone else do your thinking for you." Since I trusted him on that, it was inevitable that I would become a Unitarian, although that's probably not what he intended.

"Free and responsible search" implies that we are not bound by creeds and church authority in our search. It also implies that we must apply our common sense and give serious thought to what we believe. We must follow our conscience, but can't just believe any old thing we want, as some critics of Unitarianism charge.

"Free and responsible search" also points to the natural tension between faith and reason, science and religion. It also suggests, at least to some folks, that science is reasonable and religion is not. It isn't that simple.

The strengths of science are obvious. Thanks to scientific research, advances in medicine, technology, biology and other fields have greatly improved our lives. Even when science goes astray and is more harmful than helpful, it's usually science that also provides the cure.

But even at its best, science, like everything else we know, is tentative and approximate, always subject to change when new information becomes available. At its worst, it can become perverted by arrogance, defensiveness and dogmatism. That's called "scientism" by its critics. Here are some examples:

When Jane Goodall was beginning her work on primates, she was introducing a new way of doing research. Rather than moving her subjects into a laboratory and observing them through a one-way window, she moved herself into the wild and studied the apes up close in their natural environment. Her non-traditional approach drew criticism from other scientists and some of it got nasty. An editor at *National Geographic* recalled that some of Goodall's scientific critics lampooned her as the "blonde bimbo."

In one of his books, the Dali Lama recalls an incident that occurred at a conference he attended on the study of human consciousness. Some of the scientists resented the Buddhist leader's presence, saying the conference was about rational science, not irrational religion. In the East, the prevailing view is that matter is an epiphenomena of consciousness, while in the West, the prevailing view--at least among materialists--is that consciousness comes from matter. Or put another way, the brain secretes consciousness much like the liver secretes bile. One doctrinaire scientist at the gathering tried challenging the Dali Lama assuring him that the materialist view was the only reasonable one. The Dali Lama cleverly responded that that particular view was a metaphysical assumption, not a proven theory.

Not to be outdone, the scientist tried snaring the Dali Lama one more time with the following question: "If an established scientific theory were to conflict with your religion, how would you react?" The Dali Lama responded that the religion would have to be changed to match the science. Who do you think was more reasonable? There's been a series of books recently from some fairly dogmatic neo-atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens's. Hitchens actually claims that religion spoils everything. It's true that bad religion is harmful. BUT SPOILS EVERYTHING? REALLY? Has Hitchens not heard Bach's B Minor Mass, seen any of the great cathedrals of Europe, or seen art or read poetry created in the name of religion? Many of our leading universities and hospitals are religious institutions.

When I was a student at the University of Oklahoma, one of my professors, Phil Luhan, said that racial prejudice was often based on observed behavior. Luhan said it becomes a problem when you take the behavior of one individual and generalize it to an entire population. While reading a review of Hitchens's book, I was reminded of Dr. Luhan's warning.

I may be getting too far off of the subject here, but there's something about the neo-atheists that baffles me. Sam Harris skewers the religious belief of others, but says there's a transcendent reality that he approaches through Buddhist practice. In an interview conducted by the online magazine Salon.com, an interviewer asked Richard Dawkins about Carl Sagan's near-religious reverence for the Cosmos. Dawkins told the interviewer that Carl Sagan believed in "some deep mystery" and then added "As do I." When confronted about his search for extra-terrestrials despite the lack of evidence, Sagan famously responded, "The absence of proof is not the proof of absence." Unfortunately, Sagan wasn't willing to extend that openness to subjects that didn't interest him, such as religion. Does anybody else see a contradiction there?

My point here is to simply illustrate that science is done by fallible human beings and isn't always as intellectually pure as we might like to believe.

One need not look very far to see how nutty religion can be. Fundamentalism of all kinds, Biblical creationism, religious dominionism, reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary in doughnuts and soap scum, and other nonsense on some days seems to dominate the news. What gets lost in the deluge of religious tripe is that many good people think very hard about their religious beliefs and do their best to reconcile them with everything else they know about the world. Examples include the Jesus Seminar, Bishop Spong and academic theologians, including Unitarians, working in universities around the world.

One of the causes of nutty religion is the way religious education is practiced in most churches. Most people's religious education, if they get any at all, ends while they're in grade school. And no matter how smart they are or how many advanced degrees they have, their religious maturity remains in the sixth grade. And since they can't reconcile what they know about religion with what they know about everything else, many simply abandon religious faith as unreasonable.

Moving from faith to humanism has been the dominant option in Unitarianism over the past several decades, but there are signs indicating that's changing. I once asked Rev. Ron Knapp, a retired UU minister from Omaha, if the dominance of humanism is a permanent fixture in UUism or a generational bubble. He said he thought it was a generational bubble and that our denomination was becoming more spiritual.

An online article I recently read reported that the current trend with UUism is to re-embrace forms of theism, both in worship and as a focus of intellectual inquiry. This has led to a shift away from secular humanism, agnosticism and atheism, and towards natural theism, liberal Christianity and other forms of spirituality.

Since UUism is becoming more spiritual, how can we do it in a reasonable manner? There are way too many possibilities to discuss them all here, but I'll hazard suggesting a lowest-common-denominator formula that summarizes what I've read on the subject, including the book, Reasonable Religion, by Unitarian minister Robert Romig.

--It can't be dogmatic. It should be flexible enough to change when new information comes along.

--It can't conflict with what we already know to be true.

--It should help one cultivate a generous heart and a willingness to help others and the greater community.

--It should help provide a sense of meaning in one's life and promote hope for the future.

--It should engender a sense of awe and wonder about life and the cosmos.

--It may or may not use the language of traditional faith. It must also recognize the right of others to use the religious language they find most meaningful.

--It should help one be tolerant of the choices of others, as long as those choices are not harmful to the community.

What I've tried to do today is reflect on the natural tension between reason and religion. On one hand, I fear I've raised more questions than I've answered. But then on the other hand, with regard to religion, the questions are much more interesting than the answers anyway.