**OPINION**

**Different Responses to the Current State of Unitarian Universalism**

**By**

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Unitarian Universalism is dying. It is true that many other denominations are also suffering a decline in membership and church attendance, but for Unitarian Universalism various factors in addition to the religious malaise within the general population have contributed to the decline. There is active flight from the denomination due to recent and ongoing fundamental changes in the foundational concepts of Unitarian Universalism as a liberal religion. The imposition of control on the part of Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) leadership is curtailing the centuries-old tradition of congregational polity. Efforts by the UUA to encourage the abandonment the seven core Principles of the religion, as well as the six sources of the faith, are an example of the many troubling of changes occurring within the denomination. The list is long.

Recognizing the likely consequences for the fundamental nature of Unitarian Universalism as a result of the direction in which the UUA’s current leadership is headed, some courageous ministers and lay persons have raised their voices and called attention to what they believe are the misguided policies of the central UUA hierarchy. Their voices provide an alternative vision of Unitarian Universalism’s future as a liberal religion. A number of dissident groups have formed. The number of members in these groups, including the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA), is still relatively small, although growing rapidly. The survival of Unitarian Universalism as a religion will depend, however, upon the majority of Unitarian Universalists recognizing and responding to the existential crisis threatening their denomination.

To date there have been no large formal unbiased surveys of the responses of Unitarian Universalists to the changes that have already taken place or those that are proposed for the religion in the near future. From my own personal interactions with my Unitarian Universalist friends, as well as what I have read on some of the various dissident groups’ websites and in social media, it seems to me that the current state of Unitarian Universalism has caused widespread and varied grief responses very similar to the “Five Stages of Grief”, described by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross . These stages are *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression* and *Acceptance*. While Kübler-Ross’s concept was initially applied to dealing with the grief reactions related to one’s own imminent demise, it has subsequently been applied to the death of a loved one, and even to divorce, job loss and other similar personal “loss” situations. While Kübler-Ross ’s hypothesis is not accepted by all psychologists and mental health professionals, it nonetheless provides a descriptive framework with which to characterize behavioral responses to significant personal loss, including spiritual and religious loss.

The first stage of the Kübler-Ross schema is *Denial*. At this stage the respondent refuses to believe what they have been told and often will cling to a false but more acceptable reality. When told that they have a fatal illness, a patient may believe the diagnosis is simply wrong, that there was some mistake. A similar reaction is commonly encountered among Unitarian Universalists particularly when told that the emphasis on covenants in the Bylaws will strictly limit the ability of their congregation to make its own decisions, i.e. congregational polity will be strictly curtailed if not completely eliminated. Congregants will say that the UUA has very little to do with decisions made by their congregation. That was so in the past, but is no longer true. There are now many examples of instances when UUA Leadership intervened directly in the local affairs of congregations. Nonetheless, Denial is probably the most common Kübler-Ross stage at the present time.

It should also be pointed out that, in addition to those in Denial, some members of UU congregations are totally unaware of the Bylaw changes or their significance, suggesting that these changes were not mentioned by their minister nor brought up at any congregational meeting. There are also those Unitarian Universalists who have embraced the identity-centric policies of the UUA leadership and support the changes to the Bylaws and to the fundamental nature of the religion. Individuals in these groups would not be expected to be experiencing any form of grief response. The number of these individuals compared to those who have recognized the changes in their religion and are manifesting some form of grief response is not known.

*Anger* is the second Kübler-Ross stage of grief, which occurs when an individual can no longer sustain their denial that an unfavorable outcome is on the horizon. In the case of Unitarian Universalists, Anger is often a reaction to the frustration at the realization that they are powerless to prevent the course of the demise of the religion that has been an important part of their lives. Based upon my conversations with friends and my reading of posts on social media and other on-line sources, Anger may be the second most common response, after Denial, to the UUA-promoted changes to Unitarian Universalism.

The third Kübler-Ross stage of grief is *Bargaining*. Here the individual tries to strike a bargain with the entity that is causing his/her grief. For example, some people will vow to change their life style to avoid the consequence of an inevitably fatal disease. Others will try to negotiate with God to give them more time to live so that they could be present at an important family event such as a wedding or birth. In the case of the ultimate death of Unitarian Universalism as we have known it, some groups have tried to negotiate with the UUA Leadership or appeal to other Unitarian Universalists attempting to preserve an important aspect of the religion, namely the 7 Principles. They may believe that if the 7 Principles were retained, their religion as they have known it, might survive. However, I believe that the changes that have already been made to Unitarian Universalism and particularly its denominational governance, go far beyond anything that retention of the 7 Principles could reverse.

I would also note that while the Kübler-Ross stages are defined individually, one often observes more than one “stage” occurring in the same individual at the same time. I have often observed a person expressing both Anger and Bargaining concurrently.

The fourth Kübler-Ross stage is *Depression*. At this stage the individual despairs, realizing that there is no hope of changing the final outcome. For example, realizing that one’s own death is inevitable and imminent, some will become withdrawn, sullen and mournful. At this stage, Unitarian Universalists recognizing that their denomination is dying and, if their own congregations have also chosen the path set out by the UUA, will resign from their congregation. Sadly, many of us have already done so.

The final Kübler-Ross grief stage is *Acceptance*. In the case of one’s own impending death, at this stage people will realize that the end is inevitable and will prepare for it, often cherishing every remaining day that they have. It is at this point that emotional turmoil ceases and clear thinking predominates. Unitarian Universalists who have reached this stage accept the undeniable fact that the Unitarian Universalism of the UUA is no longer their religion and many will set about seeking an alternative liberal religion.

Individuals do not necessarily experience all of the Kübler-Ross stages of grief nor in the sequence described above. Some will only experience one or two stages. There are some of us that arrived at the stage of Acceptance relatively rapidly, while others have remained stuck in one of the earlier stages described above. Psychologists may say that those of us who arrived quickly at the Acceptance stage did not truly experience grief or perhaps experienced it only briefly. Grief is likely to be more profound and prolonged if demise of the loved one is sudden and unexpected. Those of us who arrived at the Acceptance stage relatively quickly may have seen the changes coming for several years and were therefore not surprised at the current state in which the denomination finds itself.

Metaphorically sitting at the deathbed of moribund Unitarian Universalism, some retain the hope of Denial while others are still Bargaining. For many, finality will not come until June 2024 at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly when the Bylaws of the UUA will be changed. This will be the funeral of a once vigorous Faith. But even then, some may remain in the stage of Denial. Nevertheless, many of us who have reached the stage of Acceptance have already been planning and working on a future liberal religion, a successor to the Unitarian Universalism of the UUA. A religion based on the principles of the Enlightenment that gave birth to Unitarianism. A religion of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance, rooted in a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and all peoples. A religion that will be supported and served by the North American Unitarian Association.

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