



# Liberal Beacon

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This issue represents a small milestone for *Liberal Beacon*; our now bi-monthly publication has entered into the realm of double digits. That’s not bad considering NAUA has only been around about a year. *Liberal Beacon* is the product of a small but committed Editorial Board and a cadre of contributors who have all done an outstanding job making Issue #10 as informative and interesting as usual. (You can access all issues on our website at [www.naunitarians.org](http://www.naunitarians.org).)



This issue includes a fascinating history of Universalism and pietism by Dr. Vernon Chandler, a first-time contributor. Rev. Terry Cummings takes us from pietism to the subject of religious pluralism, followed by Bruce Knotts, who reminds us there might be a lot more to diversity than we think. Judy Robbins follows this by exploring the difference between *Beloved*, with a capital “B,” and what it means to *be loved*. Kevin McCulloch then shares an open statement first presented to his own congregation about the Unitarian Universalist Association’s proposed changes to the seven principles as outlined in Article II of its bylaws. I

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follow this up with a few of my own recent thoughts about mind-control cults.

Issue #10 also includes our regular features, like our Calendar of Events and Letters to the Editor. So, without further ado, enjoy!

**Todd F. Eklof**  
Editor

# Sensing the Spiritual Realm

## *Benneville and Early Universalist Pietism*

Vernon Chandler



*[This article is an abbreviated and edited version of Dr. Chandler's keynote address at the 2023 annual meeting of the Trustees of the Pennsylvania Universalist Convention held at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County, Reading, Pennsylvania on October 14, 2023.]*

**M**odern day narratives of Universalism often neglect or overlook significant spiritual aspects of the early Universalist faith. Contemporary Unitarian Universalists often assume Universalism was primarily about “the supreme worth of every human personality,” but this affirmation wasn’t added to the Universalist avowal until 1935. This is not to imply that the Universalists of the 1700s didn’t value the worth of every human

personality, but their primary focus was upon the human soul, not the human personality. Early Universalists viewed creation through sacred lenses. Theirs was not a secular faith. Modern Unitarian Universalism bears little resemblance to the rich spirituality expressed in early Universalism.

The early Universalists were believers in the spiritual realm. What is the spiritual realm? The spiritual realm goes by various names depending upon one’s religion and faith. Early Universalists were comfortable using the term “God” when referencing the spiritual realm.

Early Universalists put a high emphasis upon pietism. Often, we confuse pietism with pietistic. The two words have entirely different meanings. Pietism is synonymous with personal

devotional or individual prayer life. Pietistic is associated with self-righteousness.

Pietism embraced mystical and intuitive knowledge. Pietism emphasized personal faith as being much more spiritually vital than was church doctrine, sacraments, and theology. There was the German pietism that emerged within Lutheranism; Huguenot pietism arose within French Catholicism; and Methodist pietism appeared within the Church of England.

It was from European pietism that American Universalist pietism has its roots. Unlike 18<sup>th</sup> century Universalism, early Unitarianism had little connection with pietism. If Unitarianism has ever had a spiritual phenomenon akin to a pietism movement, it might have been the Transcendentalism of the 1800s.

Among the early Universalists, George de Benneville's background was French Huguenot and de Benneville was familiar with the German pietism within Lutheranism; James Rely and John Murray were Church of England and adherents of Methodism; Elhanan Winchester was born in Massachusetts and his early adult faith was shaped by the preaching of the evangelist George Whitefield, an Anglican priest who embraced Methodism. Winchester came to embrace universal salvation while an ordained Baptist minister.

Repentance is a spiritual concept found in all the major religions of the world. Repentance was stressed in the early Universalist faith. Whoever hears of repentance in contemporary Unitarian Universalism or from the pulpits of liberal Protestant denominations? Repentance implies sin. Does any modern person believe in sin or repentance?

The early Universalists believed in the existence of sin. Unlike Unitarians who believed humankind was basically good, early Universalists believed humans to be capable of the best and the worst. Humanity was a composite of good and evil. Sin was real and

required repentance. According to the preaching of George de Benneville, James Rely, John Murray, and Elhanan Winchester, repentance was necessary for every soul prior to the experience of universal salvation. Interestingly, Rely, Murray, and Winchester came to embrace universal salvation from their study of the Bible. De Benneville came to his belief in universal salvation from his own experience of repentance, a painful, despairing, and soul-searching 15-month period of time, as recorded in de Benneville's autobiography. George de Benneville concluded that if God's love could forgive him of his many sins, God's love could forgive anyone!

After de Benneville's experience of repentance, he began preaching the message of repentance and universal salvation. This led to his arrest, twice, while in France. After his second arrest, de Benneville was sentenced to death by beheading. He was mere seconds from being guillotined when his death sentence was reprieved. After his release from the French prison, de Benneville continued preaching in Germany and the Netherlands.

George de Benneville's belief in the importance of repentance was further made known to him as a result of a phenomenal near-death experience in 1740. For over 42 hours, de Benneville was presumed dead. This was an unusually long near-death experience.

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are intensely vivid and sometimes life altering occurrences often associated with extreme physiological conditions involving major trauma, cardiac arrest, or cessation of brain activity. A different type of NDE is occasionally experienced by hospice patients and the terminally ill as these individuals near their deaths. Hospice NDEs vary but are often characterized by the sensation of intense and/or other-worldly colors, smells, and/or energies accompanied by the perceived presence of deceased loved ones. Although NDEs are not common, the frequency of their occurrences is sufficient for modern medicine

to recognize their possibility. Medical schools, nursing schools, and hospital-based clinical chaplaincy training programs include the topic of NDEs in their training curriculums.

George de Benneville's 42 hours of assumed death—which again was an extraordinarily long NDE—show many NDE characteristics, which, again. Most documented NDEs involve minutes or hours. De Benneville's NDE spanned a period of almost 2 days. In his autobiography, de Benneville writes of an amazing journey into the afterlife, accompanied by two spiritual guardians. It was during this experience that de Benneville says his soul observed non-repentant souls undergoing the anguish of the "habitations of the damned," a purgatory-like existence where souls of the deceased had to experience remorse and repentance prior to moving on to the "celestial heavens."

Once de Benneville returned to his body (and startled mourners who had gathered near his coffin), de Benneville claimed that the 42 hours seemed like years for him. After this experience, that he boarded a ship from Europe to the Pennsylvania colony, where he spent the remaining 52 years of his life preaching Universalism and practicing medicine, a medical practice that evolved to include treatments and medicinal herbs he discovered from his interaction and friendships with local native Americans.

Early Universalists didn't reject the possibility of sudden Damascus Road experiences such as the one told of Saul of Tarsus (who became the Apostle Paul). Scripture doesn't indicate any practice of pietism by Saul of Tarsus prior to his encounter with a blinding light. Early Universalists believed that the practice of pietism helped make it more likely for humans to sense the spiritual realm. Church sacraments, doctrine, and rituals are possible portals to the spiritual realm... but they aren't the spiritual realm.

The pietism of early Universalists was based upon Christianity, as was the pietism of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. But all of the major religions of the world practice pietism. (Unitarian Transcendentalism was primarily based upon the Hindu religion.) At the heart of pietism is one's individual devotional or prayer life and the small group sharing related to the practice of a spiritual discipline.

When describing the relationship between pietism and the spiritual realm, the analogy might be made with preparing a garden. Pietism, or a personal devotional/prayer life, is akin to preparing the soil for planting. Pietism involves tilling the earth, providing adequate moisture; noting the sunlight and temperature; applying fertilizer, and planting the seeds at the proper depth. But the gardener doesn't cause the seeds to sprout new life. The gardener is a midwife to the mystery and wonder of germination. The miracle of the seed shedding its shell, forming roots into the dirt, and emerging from the earth as a green shoot are beyond the abilities and talents of the gardener.

According to early Universalists, pietism helped prepare the soul for awakening to the spiritual realm. Repentance, and the grace of universal salvation, followed this spiritual awakening.

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# Religious Pluralism in Context

Terry Cummings

**G**rateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.

The above claim, that Unitarian Universalism has been enriched by religious pluralism, has been enshrined in the postscript to the principles and sources of the denomination since they were adopted in 1985. Nearly 40 years on, with the future of the principles and purposes themselves in doubt, now might be a good time to ask ourselves what “religious pluralism” means, and whether the claim is still valid. Can we do better?

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations display multiple images of religious icons in their worship spaces: symbols taken from the world’s major faith traditions side-by-side or in a circle. A cross, a Star of David, a Yin and Yang symbol, etc., displayed together is commonplace.

These images are a recognition that the human experience, the human spiritual experience, includes religious diversity. They convey the message that “we welcome all religious beliefs here,” and “we respect all of the world’s major religions here.”

For the most part, the message that a diversity of religious backgrounds is welcomed is genuine. One should therefore hesitate before being critical of these displays of multiple religious symbols. For this is the iconography of an intentionally inclusive religious faith.

If we step outside Unitarian Universalism, however, it becomes evident that the fact that

there are so many religions in the world raises questions for their followers. These questions include 1) Is there only one true religion, or does each religion have a legitimate claim to being a true religion? 2) Are followers of religions other than one’s own denied the opportunity for salvation, heaven, etc.? 3) If God wants there to be only one true religion, why have there always been so many, and why is religious diversity still thriving? 4) If different religions all have relevant and valid truth claims, albeit different ones, does that mean that it makes no difference which religion one follows, or are all religions “different paths to the same mountaintop?” 5) If different religions all have relevant and valid truth claims, are there actually different deities, and different mountains each with its own separate path?

Different faith traditions have come up with different answers to these questions. Inclusivism holds that one’s own religion possesses the *best* truth, but that weaker forms of religious truth, and even revelation, can exist in other religions. Compare this with exclusivism, which claims that there is only one way to God and salvation and that one’s own community, tradition, and encounter with God comprise the one and only exclusive truth.

In some ways, the displays of multiple religious symbols that I described above seem to represent Unitarian Universalism hedging its bets in response to these questions. A collective, perhaps even a facetious, statement of, “yes to all of the above.”

I wonder, however, whether the drafters of the principles and sources were intentional in using the term “religious pluralism?” Were they aware that religious pluralism is the subject of discussion in the world of theology? Did they have in mind the likes of theologians like John Hick and Paul Knitter, who had written about religious pluralism in the previous decade?

There is no specific, accepted, definition of religious pluralism but most academics would likely consider it the belief that multiple religions can exist in a society, wherein each religion is accepted as legitimate and is provided equal opportunity to succeed.



That all religions are equally valid in their beliefs and rituals, irrespective of their differences.

In the 1970s, for instance, Hick pointed out that our religious beliefs are shaped to a large extent by where in the world we are born and the culture in which we are raised. It is human nature for me to believe that my religion, which has different beliefs about God and moral behavior than yours, is superior to your religion because it can lay claim to having ultimate truth. In contrast, religious pluralism accepts that no one tradition can claim to possess the singular truth and that all groups' beliefs and practices are equally valid when interpreted within their own culture. Thus, no one religion is inherently better than or superior to any other major world religion. As noted by Hick, "to insist on the unique superiority of your own faith is to be part of the problem. For, how can there be stable peace between rival absolutes?"

I think most theologians would also agree that religious pluralism requires more than welcoming people of different religious backgrounds. It requires a level of engagement by the members of the various religious

traditions with each other, as opposed to existing side by side as neighbors. By

engagement, I am referring to dialogue about their relationships, about different rituals, beliefs, and traditions, as distinct from interfaith cooperation around specific social justice issues such as hunger and housing,

working for world peace, and so forth.

Paul Knitter, a pluralist, pointed out that "Real interreligious dialogue is not easy. And it can be dangerous. If we understand dialogue to be more than just chit-chat . . . then dialogue is going to make both difficult and risky demands."

Another problem with pluralism is that it is difficult to engage in dialogue and cooperation from a strictly objective position. Our human nature drives us to argue the merits of our own religion rather than admit its flaws. We have so much invested in our beliefs that dialogue with the religious other is not always productive.

With all this in mind, we might ask ourselves whether Unitarian Universalism can legitimately claim to embody religious pluralism. UUs who identify as Christians might well question whether the claim that *religious pluralism... enriches and ennobles our faith* is a valid one for Unitarian Universalism. UUs who identify as Muslims might point to the conspicuous absence of the Quran from the six sources as contradicting the claim to be a pluralistic faith.

We might also ask whether it was ever realistic for a denomination like Unitarian Universalism to claim that it embraced religious pluralism. To engage in a dialogue with other faiths requires that the participant has a starting point. A participant who disclaims having any theological beliefs doesn't have much to contribute to the engagement of views, except perhaps the appeal of relativism.

When, some years ago, I first began attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I remember the minister sharing that Unitarian Universalism makes no claim to having, or knowing, ultimate truth. I felt comfortable with that because I have never believed that any religion could make such a claim. It felt refreshing to receive such candor. And it still does. But that does not mean that Unitarian Universalism embraces religious pluralism.

Unitarian Universalism might better be described as embracing a kind of "anything goes," "it's all good," once-over-lightly approach to religious diversity. "It doesn't matter what your theological beliefs are because we can all get along." This approach can be criticized as being a form of relativism, rather than pluralism. Relativism denies the *existence* of absolute truth (as distinct from disclaiming ownership of it), and claims that all truth is relative to the person who believes it.

It may have been expecting too much from the drafters of the UU principles and sources to have said "Grateful for the religious *relativism* which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision." I wonder, though, if the time has come to redefine what we mean, what we are hoping for, in our discussion of religious diversity?

I believe that implicit in affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person lies the right to explore and follow their own individual

spiritual journeys. Can we agree that building a denomination in which everyone has the opportunity to embrace, expand, and develop their individual religious and spiritual identity is one of its principles and purposes? I invite our readers to share their responses to that question in a "letter to the editor" with the hope that we can include them in future editions of *Liberal Beacon*.

The Sufi mystic Rumi once said, "I looked for God. I went to a temple, and I didn't find him there. Then I went to a church, and I didn't find him there. And then I went to a mosque, and I didn't find him there. And then finally I looked in my heart, and there he was."

## The Diversity of Diversity *Why Integration is Still the Right Way Forward*

Bruce Knotts

**W**hen I was growing up, I considered the most despicable man in America to be Alabama Governor George Wallace, who said repeatedly, "Segregation now, segregation forever." He also railed against interracial marriage, which he called the mongrelisation of the white race. On the other hand, the person I admired the most was Dr. Martin Luther King who famously said:

*I have a dream that one day, right down in Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to live together as brothers.*

*I have a dream that one day, one day little white children and little Negro children will be able to join hands as brothers and sisters.*

*I have a dream this afternoon that my four little children, that my four little children will not come up in the same young days that I came up within,*

*but they will be judged on the basis of the content of their character, not the color of their skin.*

Because I love the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, and hate the bigotry of George

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*As a gay man, the last place I want to be is in a room with only white gay men. I don't like gay bars. Just as I prefer to not be in the room of only one race, I also don't want to be in a room of only one sexual orientation. Give me Diversity every time.*

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Wallace, imagine my horror when my husband, Isaac, (a black man) and I (a white man) joined All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. and immediately found a group of black members of the congregation who invited Isaac to a gathering, but told him that he couldn't bring his white husband.

I believe in personal autonomy and agency and that such identity groups violate these principles. It was presumed that my husband wanted to be with a group of black people he'd never met before just because he's black. Nor was there any consideration for my feelings as a new member being left behind.

My husband is black and when he is in a room and sees another black person, he feels some ease knowing that he's not the only black person in the room. However, he doesn't associate with anyone easily. He needs to get to know you before he'll consider socializing with you. Assuming that just because he is black he will automatically be happy and ready to socialize with black UUs he's never met before is racist. It prejudices what Isaac must feel solely based upon the color of his skin. Such an assumption is false and belittling of him as an

individual because it presumes to know his wishes by the color of his skin.

One of the most horrifying moments of my life was when I spoke to a large audience in a large conference room at a United Nations Civil Society Conference in a large venue at the Salt Lake City Convention Center in Utah. When I looked at the very large audience, I realized that everyone in the audience was white with blond hair and blue eyes. I am white with blond hair and blue eyes. The last thing I want is to be part of a Stepford Wives nightmare. In contrast, I prefer my classroom at NYU with my students who are black, white (from various countries, some with dual citizenships) Asian, Latinx, another from Guyana, and more diversity yet. The last place I want to be is in an identity room (prison).

As a gay man, the last place I want to be is in a room with only white gay men. I don't like gay bars. Just as I prefer to not be in a room of only one race, I also don't want to be in a room of only one sexual orientation. Give me diversity every time.

In my experience, after years as a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association and working as Director of the UU-United Nations Office, when it comes to diversity, the UUA is mostly focused on race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Yet there are other kinds of diversity it seems to overlook. When it comes to age diversity, for example, I consider it elder-phobic. Everything is youth centered.

During its annual spring seminar, the UU-UNO used to hold intergenerational dialogue that brought together seniors and youth to exchange ideas. Both loved these meetings which highlighted the ideas and innovations of youth and the experience and wisdom of the seniors. But eventually the UUA changed this,



putting seniors in one room and the youth in another. Segregation was the objective.

One senior room was called the “grandparents’ room.” I strongly objected. I am 74 years old, so definitely a senior. However, I’m a gay man and I’ve never fathered children. I’ve never been a parent nor grandparent. To assume that all seniors are grandparents is to assume what isn’t true. Rather than lumping them together and then pushing all seniors aside, keeping them integrated can bring enormous value to the lives of young people, the same value I try to bring to my class of social work students at New York University.

That’s another kind of diversity that often gets overlooked: diversity of education. Unitarian Universalist congregations tend to consist of more members with advanced degrees than those who, often due to limited resources, have only graduated from high school. There are also different kinds of education. Some indigenous people, for example, do not have formal western education but are highly educated in the traditions and wisdom of indigenous education.

Unitarian Universalism has been fairly good at dealing with religious diversity, but not at all with political diversity. But let’s not go there now. The point is, there’s a lot more to diversity than race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. If the point is to be more inclusive, then there is so much more we ought to include by concentrating a whole lot more on integration than segregation.

For decades our liberal religion has fought racism, homophobia, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination, often facing unfair attacks from some on the right because we continue to support the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Today we’re being criticized from some on the left because we

oppose segregating people into identity groups instead of including each of us, in all of our diversity, into conversations where all views are welcome and where we can all learn from each other.

## Be Loved

Judy Robbins

The word “Beloved” has been bandied about and overused so much in Unitarian Universalist circles lately that I bristle when I am called *Beloved* by someone who has no idea who I am. It feels patronizing and fake. The more it’s repeated, the less I want to be any part of a capitalized Beloved Community that doesn’t take the time to get to know me. The confounding thing is that I already feel part of a beloved UU community, one with no capital letters and no fanfare. My community doesn’t need to ply me with words because its quiet actions say it all. My beloved community is the Unitarian Society of Hartford (USH). Here in Connecticut, we are not inclined to call each other Beloved. To us, it makes more sense to make two words of it: our church is a place to *be loved*.

What does it mean to be loved within the context of a UU church? I wager that most of the congregants in the Hartford church feel loved. But why, exactly? I challenged myself to come up with a checklist of conditions that engender love among a sizeable, diverse group. Many examples of love in action come to mind, but let me start with a recent one.

In January, Carol Lacoss and I did a [Teach-In on the Article II Revision](#). These bylaw changes propose to radically restrict the definition and scope of Unitarian Universalism. Feelings run strong on both sides of this issue. I was wary of putting our minister in a spot by staging a

potentially controversial event at our church. I expected a warning but instead he encouraged me. Acknowledging that he was unlikely to agree with me on every point, he strongly defended my right to speak my mind. That's the essence of our first UU principle, respect for my inherent worth and dignity. And it's one small example of the many ways love can show up in a UU church when the conditions are right.

In compiling this list, I realized it's the same checklist that would define a psychologically healthy church. It starts with the first principle.

**Respect** for the inherent worth and dignity of all. A healthy, loving church community assumes people are innately good. We are all doing the best we can with what we have at the time. "What we have at the time" includes our talents and wisdom and also our shortcomings and hang-ups. The overarching assumption is that no matter what we bring to the table, we all love our church and want the best for it. The institution itself has its own inherent worth and dignity. USH deserves our respectful love and care right along with the individuals that comprise the community.

**Trust.** A healthy, loving congregation trusts that nothing bad will come from free thinking and free speech. People are encouraged to speak from their hearts. Good listening skills are fostered. At the Hartford church, most of the congregation has participated in one form or another of *small group ministry*, known by various names like *connection circles*. These small groups use nonjudgmental listening skills and there is a ripple effect impacting the entire congregation. To trust that we can speak freely and be heard generates a distinct feeling of being loved.

**Nonjudgment.** A healthy congregation tolerates and even encourages a certain amount of risk taking. As much as we like our routines and rituals, we understand that it's good to keep

things fresh by trying new ideas or even—gasp—a new paint color in Fellowship Hall. There is no shaming or blaming for failure, just praise for the effort and the lessons learned. Curiosity is encouraged. Not only, "what would happen if..." but also, "what did we learn from that?" Congregants can relax knowing they don't have to watch their backs. Mistakes are quickly forgiven. If people are worried about being judged, feelings of love will be in short supply.

Conversely, mistrust and wariness are aroused if strong leaders try to foist their agenda on the freethinkers that comprise liberal congregations. I hope this kind of strong-arming is rare on the local level but when it arises, it tends to splinter congregations. No one likes to feel scolded from the pulpit and folks will quietly tiptoe away. Several years ago, USH found itself in this situation and many Sunday mornings I chose the New York Times crossword over listening to ministers who used the pulpit as a platform for their political agendas. What kept me active in the church was my attachment to a community I loved and that loved me back.

**Authenticity.** What you see is what you get. A healthy, loving congregation is honest and owns its shortcomings. If, for example, the religious education program is tanking, it is not publicized as a strength. The reverse is also true. In their book, *Big Ideas for Small Congregations*, Rev. Jane Dwinnell and Ellen Germann-Melosh say that small congregations need to figure out the thing they are best at and stake their claim on that one thing. If they do, their impact will exceed their small size.

Authenticity has a personal side, too. A healthy church may be the one place where we can risk being our authentic selves, showing our vulnerabilities as well as our assets. When we can shed our masks and be accepted, warts and all, we feel loved. We also feel loyal and

inspired to serve. Or perhaps *not* to serve. Being authentic sometimes means saying no. UUs are such nice folks that no does not come easily to many of us. But saying yes when we mean no leads to resentment. Loving churches do not pressure members to say yes. The very best churches go out of their way to ensure that volunteers are only doing what they enjoy doing.

**Transparency.** Hartford is a medium-sized congregation with a cadre of solid volunteers and probably too many committees. Communication problems arise more frequently than we'd like. Most communication glitches are not solved by simply reading the e-news. But keeping people in the loop is one sure way to let people know they are loved.

The Rev. Fred Rogers, known on TV as *Mister Rogers*, made a very successful career out of just this – delivering honest, age-appropriate information. We never outgrow our need for honest information. Finding ways to deliver information is a hallmark of a healthy, loving congregation.

The dark side of transparency is secrecy and it can poison the morale of a congregation. Rumors and bad feelings can sweep through a congregation like a virus. A few years back, there were accusations against a popular minister by disgruntled staff. The resulting investigation was shrouded in secrecy because it was a “personnel matter.” Morale plummeted, rumors abounded, the Board was vilified, and everyone was hurt in this debacle, most of all the minister. Even in “personnel matters,” there are skillful ways to help a congregation feel they are honored and included. Given a legitimate need for discretion, we still cannot forget the First Principle that assures our inherent worth is respected. People know they are loved when they are told what's going on.

**Acceptance.** As a psychotherapist, I saw countless people with erroneous thinking about acceptance. Acceptance means only this: “I get it; this is how it is right now.” It does *not* mean I have to like it or make it my own. There are times when things won't go my way. *What? Are we really going to paint Fellowship Hall pink? I argued for antique white and lost. So I accept pink as the will of the group.* It's what is even though I may never like it. The rubber really hits the road when it's not paint but people that we have to accept. UU church doors are open to all, so inevitably there will be people I may not like who are sitting in the same pew. The same rules apply. I am not required to like them in order to accept them. They are part of my world and that's just the way it is. In a liberal religion, all that is asked of me is that I keep an open mind. Over time, I've had to admit that folks I disliked initially turned out to be pretty good people.

The conditions I outline here are easy to grasp, not very hard to implement and form a basis for love to flourish. I don't understand a capitalized Beloved Community that purports to love me but defies these conditions. Capitalized Love is centered in that capitalized Beloved Community but it feels phony and untrustworthy when accompanied by so much indifference to who I am, what I believe or how I live my life. What I *do* understand is a centuries-old liberal tradition that points me inward to my conscience as my guide, and at the same time, outward toward my own lower-case beloved community where love quietly flourishes amid an atmosphere of lightness, humor, warmth, and forgiveness.

I can well imagine the big guffaw I'd get if I presumed to call someone in my congregation *My Beloved*. And in that laughter lies strong bonds of real love.

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*UU churches in the Hartford, CT area and at UU Rowe Conference Center in the Berkshires. Currently she serves as a Worship Associate at the Unitarian Society of Hartford. See her teaching about the Article II Revision [here](#).*

## Open Statement in Opposition to Article II Revisions

Kevin McCulloch

*[The following statement was presented during a special meeting on the topic at Kevin's home congregation in Roswell, GA on January 14, 2024.]*

**H**i, everyone. I'm Kevin McCulloch. I'm a lifelong Unitarian Universalist but I'm fairly new to this congregation. I'm concerned with these proposed changes, so I'm grateful to the board for giving me a chance to air my concerns in this forum. Given how short our time is, I'm going to make my case and then spend the rest of our time together listening to others. Ultimately, what makes us UUs is not that we are of one mind about things, but that we deal with our differences productively. That means not shying away from our disagreements but making an honest effort to understand one another's point of view. I offer my concerns in that spirit.

The Principles and Purposes of the UUA is an odd document. It is not a creed or catechism. It governs congregations, not individuals. And yet it is the closest thing we have to a common definition of our faith. The seven principles and six sources are deeply embedded in our practices and our sense of self, and they are the first thing we offer to newcomers who want to know what Unitarian Universalism is. If we change them, we change our collective

understanding of what we are about. We should not do this lightly.

I've lived with the principles and sources for most of my life, and I know a lot of UUs who feel ambivalent about them because they don't quite express the depth of their religious feeling or the extent of their commitment to justice. But that is not what they are designed to do. They are designed to affirm the underlying commitments that make liberal religion possible. They are something like an operating system for our church, and I think they powerfully articulate the commitment to universal liberal ideals, such as human dignity and freedom of conscience, that make us who we are.

In the proposed shift from principles to values, we are being asked to define ourselves with six generalities surrounding the word "Love." Of course, we should strive to be loving. But I think we need to consider that love is a concept with considerable theological baggage, particularly if we capitalize the word and talk about it as a force that liberates. We are told not to attach any particular metaphysical meaning to the word, but imagine telling a newcomer that love is the core of our faith and then, when asked what this love is, or where it comes from, or how it works, answering, "Well, it depends on who you ask." Elevating one religious concept above others is an awkward thing to do in a liberal church.

Consider also that love is an important theological concept in every branch of Christianity. Even Christians who are explicitly illiberal—who teach that homosexuality is a sin, or that women should be subordinate to men—will tell you that their message is rooted in love. Love is not what makes us distinct. What makes us distinct is our commitment to liberal ideals.

One argument I've heard for the shift to values is that six individual words are more succinct

and understandable than seven statements. But these value words are not self-interpreting, as evidenced by the fact that each of the value words is supported by several sentences that crib from our current principles, cutting and pasting familiar phrases and putting them into new contexts that alter their emphasis or subtly distort their meaning. The result is far less succinct and considerably vaguer than what we have now.

Consider the value “pluralism.” The new text celebrates that we are “diverse in culture, experience, and theology,” but it does not say anything about our greatest strength, which is that we are diverse in opinion. The “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” an autonomous principle in the current language, is recontextualized as part of a covenant: “We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” I do not know what it means for a free and responsible search to be bound to a covenant to learn from other people, but I do know that a free and responsible search that can be criticized for somehow violating such a covenant is not truly free.

The new language is riddled with this sort of change: vague alterations that leave the door open to troubling interpretations. The change that I personally find the most worrisome is easy to miss. The “inclusion” section of Article 2 currently reads, “We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons.” The revised version states that “We strive to be an Association of congregations that truly welcome all persons *who share our values*” (Italics mine). This revision is being promoted as an effort to make our faith more inclusive, so why insert a conditional phrase that is clearly intended to exclude? If we are to exclude people who do not share our values, who ultimately determines what our values really mean? How do we test whether people

share them, other than by subjecting their opinions to the kind of dogmatic scrutiny that is antithetical to our liberal tradition? By what process are people to be excluded?

The current language lists six sources of religious inspiration. The new language jettisons five of them and says simply that “Direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder are primary sources of Unitarian Universalist inspiration.” This narrowed definition leaves many of us out. We are not all Transcendentalists. My primary source of religious inspiration is not the sense of wonder I get when I look up at the stars. It’s our commitment to the liberal ideals that have nurtured me personally and been such a vital force for good in the world.

The current language in Article II is not perfect, and I agree that we should continually reexamine it, ask questions, and revise it. But what we have before us is not a considered revision but a wholesale rewrite, one that opens can after can of worms. This is a monumental change, and we need time to absorb this new language, understand it, and consider downsides that are not immediately apparent. Even if you find the new language appealing, or think my concerns are overblown, can you honestly say you’ve had enough time to think about what this proposal really means, or how it might change us?

This brings me to my final concern, which is the unconscionable haste with which this proposal is being advanced. The current principles were presented at the Association’s General Assembly in 1981, and then sent to our congregations for three full years of study and reflection before they were adopted in 1984 and 1985. In contrast, the Article 2 Study Commission released the first draft of this revision in October of 2022, and an extensively amended version was put to a preliminary vote at General Assembly last June, a mere eight

months later. It has since been amended further. Many UUs are barely even aware this is happening. I wish we could take the time to have a genuinely inclusive, unhurried, association-wide conversation about these changes, but we are not being given that chance. This will be put to an all-or-nothing vote this June. I'm not hostile to change, but it's usually better to do nothing than to do the wrong thing. That is why I cannot support this proposal.

Thank you.

## Mind Control, Cults and Unitarian Universalism

Todd F. Eklof

**A** brief bout with COVID at the start of my recent winter break gave me an opportunity to binge HBO's 2020 docuseries, *Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults*. I was engrossed by the four-episode tale about a small group of men and women who believed their leaders, Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite, known as Ti and Do, were the chosen "witnesses" of space aliens coming to Earth to give everyone in the cult new "next level" alien minds and bodies. Initially, their transformation was supposed to be physical, but *Heaven's Gate* ended in 1997 with the mass suicide of its 39 members, who believed their alien redeemers had covertly arrived in a ship hidden behind the Hale-Bopp comet. Suicide, they were told and readily believed, was the only means of transporting themselves to the vessel.

After finishing *Heaven's Gate*, I noticed another such series, *Love Has Won: The Cult of Mother God*. This 2023 HBO miniseries is about another family-sized cult involving followers who

completely devoted themselves to a clearly troubled young woman claiming to be God. Despite her obvious addictions to alcohol, drugs, and sex, her acolytes believed Amy Carlson was a 19-billion-year-old deity whom they lovingly referred to as "Mom." After she died in 2021 from alcohol abuse and anorexia, her faithful followers traveled about with her mummified corpse, believing she was only asleep.

After this, I stumbled upon yet another such series on Netflix, *Raël: The Alien Prophet*, released just this year. It focuses on another UFO cult, this one led by Raël (formally known as Claude Vorilhon, born in Vichy, France in 1946). You may recall having heard of the Raélians when, in 2003, they made international headlines after announcing they had successfully cloned a human being (which they hadn't). Raël is still living, and his cult claims to have tens of thousands of members living in as many as 90 countries around the world. To most, Raël is immediately recognized for what he is, a foolish, self-serving charlatan, but, as with *Heaven's Gate* and the cult of Mother God, his followers bought into his insanity hook, line, and sinker.

What intrigued and troubled me most about all these cults was how easily and completely their members—who are often intelligent, educated, and otherwise functional individuals—so utterly abandon their power to think and act for themselves. To understand how this happens I turned to Steven Hassan's book, *Combating Mind Control*. Hassan, who was once a member of a cult himself, has become a leading expert on cults and their mind control techniques. "In these groups," he says, "basic respect for the individual is secondary to the leader's whims and ideology. People are manipulated and coerced to think, feel, and behave in a single 'right way.' Individuals become totally dependent on the group and lose the ability to

act or think on their own.” This is why, regardless of a cult’s specific beliefs, Hassan says, “I define any group that uses unethical mind control to pursue its ends—whether religious, political, or commercial—as a destructive cult.”

In answer to my question, how can intelligent people simply give up their power to think for themselves, Hassan says,

“Mind control is any system of influence that disrupts an individual’s authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one.” In some cults this is accomplished through lack of sleep and poor diet, forbidding members to associate with anyone outside the cult (including their own families), and internal pressures—positive or negative—reinforcing groupthink, with lots of shame and guilt and even punishment to diminish individual self-worth. As

Hassan says, “People at the top of these organizations do not lead through wisdom, consensus, compassion, or even brainpower. They lead by making their followers frightened and dependent. They demand obedience, and subservience.”

I was particularly struck by a line in Hassan’s book stating, “Even mainline religious organizations can have destructive aspects, use undue influence, or become destructive cults.” I wondered, *Is this what’s happened to Unitarian Universalism? Has it fallen under the spell of a mind control cult?* In recent years it has become increasingly intolerant of dissenting voices—the very antithesis of what this liberal religion is

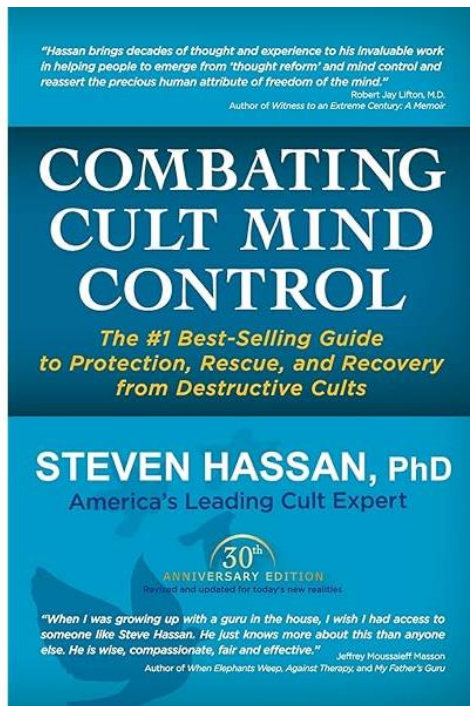
supposed to be about: the freedom of every person to think and speak for themselves. But “the essence of mind control,” Hassan says, “is that it encourages dependence and conformity, and discourages autonomy and individuality... Individualism is fiercely discouraged.”

Such intolerance should not be surprising if, as Hassan also says, mind control cults’ “basic

respect for the individual is secondary to the leader’s whims and ideology.” Since 2012, many of the UU Association’s top leaders have referred to our historic commitment to “individualism” as an “error,” the fix for which is “covenant.” As Rev. Frederic Muir put it in his 2012 Berry Street Lecture to UU ministers, “We cannot do both covenant and individualism.” During the 2016 UUA General Assembly, Moderator Jim Keys held up one of Muir’s books while announcing a

new task force on re-covenanting. “The Task Force was charged with changing the culture of the UUA from one of a member services administration to one of mutual covenanting.” In 2018, a UUA Study Action Issue was approved stating, “Decentering whiteness calls us to decenter individual dignity for our collective liberation.” And, in a 2019 *UU World* article, UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray also stated that covenant is the “antidote to individualism.”

Does this rejection of individuality and individual dignity explain the otherwise inexplicable urgency in ridding Unitarian Universalism of its Seven Principles? Especially



the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the *unconditional* free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the use of democratic processes? We do not find the words *individual, autonomy, freedom, or democracy* among the UUA's new suggested list of seven euphemisms. "Cult language is totalistic," Hassan says, "and therefore condenses complex situations, labels them, and reduces them to cult cliches."

Whether it's part of a mind-control cult or not, Unitarian Universalism has become unrecognizable in recent years, which should be as plain to most as are the absurdities expressed by Heaven's Gate, Mother God, and Raël. That there are so many who become upset, even angry, when its new dogmatism is questioned, is itself indicative of mind-control—the fear and unwillingness to think for oneself. "Members are trained to disbelieve any criticism," Hassan says.

Fortunately, he also says that just getting away from a cult's influence long enough to start thinking for oneself again can be all it takes to come to one's senses. "I have come to believe that human beings are all born with an authentic self as well as a desire for love, fairness, truth and meaning. It is something that no group can program out of a person and therefore there is always hope for real healing."

## Give and Let Give

The generosity of our supporters has made a huge impact on the programs and services NAUA is already able to offer. But as a budding association we continued to need your support as a volunteer, program participant, and financial contributor. Like the song says, "We've only just begun." With the support of our friends and members like you, "We'll find a place where there's room to grow." Anytime

you'd like to make a financial gift, please visit our NAUA website at

<https://naunitarians.org/support-us/>

## Coming Up at a Glance

April 2 @ 4 PM PST | NAUA Tuesday Circle

April 3 @ 4:30 PM PST | Anything Goes

April 6 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Saturday Circle

April 10 @ 4:30 PM PST | NAUA Academy

April 16 @ 4 PM PST | NAUA Tuesday Circle

April 20 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Worship

April 20 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Saturday Circle

April 25 @ 11 AM PST | Clergy Support Meeting

April 30 @ 4 PM PST | NAUA Tuesday Circle

May 1 @ 4 PM ST | Anything Goes Meeting

May 4 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Saturday Circle

May 14 @ 4 PM PST | NAUA Tuesday Circle

May 18 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Saturday Circle

May 18 @ 10 AM PST | NAUA Worship

May 23 @ 11 AM PST | Clergy Support Meeting

For information and updates about specific NAUA events please visit our website at

[www.naunitarian.org](http://www.naunitarian.org)

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Thanks very much to Candace Schmidt and Lynn Jinishian for your article in the most recent issue of *Liberal Beacon*. [Moral Injury: What Happens When We Lose Our Way? Jan/Feb Issue #9] I found it very interesting and



informative. I might have said that I enjoyed the article, but I think that there was too much pain reflected in it and so I would not say I enjoyed that. I really was not aware of the details of the events at UUCS and what the members who supported Todd and Todd himself had to endure. That being said, I wanted to thank both of you for writing the article.

As you mentioned, my earlier article using the Kubler-Ross grief stages to explain how UUs are reacting to the recognition that their religion is dying, if not already dead, most still haven't gotten the news. To me it is like the situation in a large family in which someone has died. Phone calls have to be made informing the relatives and friends that their loved one is dead. The members of many, if not most, UU congregations haven't gotten that telephone call. At least some haven't gotten the call because their minister has figuratively disconnected the telephone. Others have gotten the call but can't believe what they are hearing. Some will only become conscious of the loss when they get the news that they have been left out of the will, namely little of what was Unitarian Universalism, their religious inheritance, will be left for them.

As founding members of NAUA with the goal of preserving and growing Liberal Religion, dealing with the UUs that finally become aware that their religion is dead will be a significant challenge. I think that wave will come after the next GA in June this year. Thanks so much.

Stephen Polmar

**W**e welcome letters from our readers for potential publication in *Liberal Beacon*. Letters should address matters of interest to Unitarians and Universalists and other religious liberals, including current news and events.

Please email your submission no less than five business days before the end of the calendar month in order for publication in our next issue. Letters are shorter than opinion pieces and should be no more than 250 words. Form letters and letters considered libelous, obscene or in bad taste will not be printed. Anonymous letters will not be printed. NAUA reserves the right to edit all letters for length. The decision to print any submission is completely at the discretion of the editors.

Please write "Letter to the Editor" in the subject line and email your submissions to [nauaedboard@gmail.com](mailto:nauaedboard@gmail.com) or mail them to:

North American Unitarian Association  
Letters to the Editor  
4340 W. Whistalks Way  
Spokane, WA 99224

Letters must include the writer's name, full address, and phone number for verification purposes. Only the name and town will be published.

## Notice

We are still looking for a new Editor of *Liberal Beacon* who has the time, desire, and some experience with layout, design, and editing. The volunteer position includes working with our current Editorial Board and other contributors to help put together this bimonthly publication in a timely fashion. If you are interested, please let us know a bit about your interest, skills, and background by emailing us at [nauaedboard@gmail.com](mailto:nauaedboard@gmail.com).