



PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE UUA BYLAWS ARTICLE 2 A Pro / Con Review and Analysis¹

Introduction

Another draft of the proposed changes in Article 2 of the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws has been approved by delegates at the 2023 General Assembly.² This essay is a pro/con discussion using the main arguments of those in favor and the main ones against. UUs may be interested in this proposal to rewrite Article 2 because it contains the only official description of what UUism is, what we believe, and how we are governed. Significant changes are being proposed. The changes will be voted on again at the 2024 General Assembly and must pass with a 2/3 majority.

This essay is an attempt to provide an accurate, even-handed, discussion of pro and con. If there are better arguments on either side, or if this omits the most important points, please notify anne.schneider@asu.edu.

Support for the Change

Unifying Theology

Support for the new Article 2 has emphasized from the beginning the need for Unitarian Universalism to find a theological core. Paula Cole Jones (chair of the Article 2 Study Commission) explained that UUs have embraced so much theological diversity that they have no common core.³ However, she emphasized, the one thing UUs agree on, is social justice. Thus, social justice should become the theological core and the proposed rewrite of Article 2 is intended as a step in that direction.

Center Anti-racism, Anti-oppression, Multiculturalism (ARAOMC)

Supporters of the change want to intensify the UU anti-racist work, not just as a political call to action, but as the theological core of UUism. This was made explicit in the charge to the committee:⁴

They [the new principles and purposes] should ask us to choose Love in Action as the path forward. Our commitment to anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism is love in action, and should be centered in any revision of Article II.

More Community, Less Individualism

Remarks at the 2023 General Assembly where the proposed change was endorsed by an overwhelming majority, asserted that the current 7 principles, sources, and the “freedom of belief” sections place too much importance on individualism. The principle affirming a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” has been less free and less individualistic with this proposed change: “*We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*” It doesn’t say we

“listen” to one another, but that we “learn.” The transformation clause says that we “covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically.”

More Interdependence, Less Independence

Closely related to the move away from individualism toward the collective is the effort to increase a sense of interdependence with a corresponding decrease in independence and individual freedom. The principle affirming freedom of belief and right of individual conscience was opposed at General Assembly as one of the “con” speakers said UUism needs more interdependence and less freedom. Another said we simply cannot let people believe whatever they want.⁵

More Action

People in favor of the rewrite are fond of saying that “the 7 Principles have no verbs!” They say to be part of a healing world, UUs need a more articulate and more action-oriented statement in Article 2. The revisions address this by having members covenant to “do the work” that supports the new “values and covenant section.” These values are: Love (in the center), equity, transformation, pluralism, generosity, justice, and interdependence.

More Accountability

Another issue with the current Article 2 is the lack of accountability. The revision is intended to see to it that “people do what they have promised” by saying that “we are accountable to one another for doing the work...” “We covenant to...” is a stronger statement than just “affirm and promote.” Each of the values has its own covenant. Proponents of the change say the UUA needs the authority to hold people and congregations accountable. Even though the change is not as explicit as some of the earlier proposals, the statement of accountability can be interpreted to mean that UUs can somehow hold other UUs accountable. The specifics have not been identified yet.⁶

Change: “Keep up with the Times”

One of the arguments heard repeatedly at the 2023 General Assembly was that it has been too long since there was an actual review, and Article 2 should be revised to meet the current needs of the society. The last actual review was in 2009, but the recommendations from it did not pass at General Assembly.

Listen to UUA’s new leadership

Closely related to the argument that it is just time for a change, some support the new Article 2 because they believe it is time for new leadership, new voices, and that those who disagree just need to get in step with a new generation of leadership.

Opposition to the Change

Hierarchical Control

Opponents of the proposed rewrite of Article 2 say the change flips the authority and governing relationship between congregations and the UUA. The UUAs role under the new Article 2 would no longer be to serve the needs of the congregations – as defined by the congregations – but will become a hierarchy like other religions with the responsibility for judging the behavior of the congregation and declaring them “out of covenant” if needed, and dismissing them from the association. The specifics of accountability, including consequences for violations, have not even been made clear.

Eliminates the 7 Principles and Sources

Another focus of opposition is that the change eliminates the 7 principles and the sources that undergird them. Allegedly, the “values and covenant” section incorporates the principles’ core ideas, but it mentions them almost as an after-thought. The principles and sources have served as the theological core of UUism. Their elimination moves UUism away from being a liberal religion with a theological core, to being a social justice organization focused mainly on politically-oriented calls to action. Opponents do not want to lose the religiosity of UUism.

Social Justice Priorities

There also is opposition because the changes prioritize ARAOMC rather than allowing individuals and congregations to focus their social action on issues of their own choice, such as climate change, income inequality, women’s reproductive rights international peace, criminal justice reform, mental health, immigration, and others that in the past were areas of UU activism.

Accountability

Opponents object to the proposed “accountability” that is strongly implied in the rewrite. Who would exercise that kind of authority? What would be the consequences for violations? What sort of appeal processes would a person have? Would the UUA hold individuals accountable, or whole congregations? Would congregations be expected to set up “accountability” boards to see if members are “doing the work” of achieving the values? The accountability parts of the rewrite are totally premature.

Asset-Based Anti-Racism

One of the most frequent arguments used by those who want the new Article 2 is that it will enable UUism to be more effective in its anti-racist work. Opponents of the change disagree. Opponents point out that social science and behavioral research has not shown “guilt-based” strategies to be effective in reducing racism.⁷ The current UUA strategy emphasizes “shame and blame,” “confess your racism,” “all white people are racist,” and accusations of “white supremacy culture” within congregations.⁸ This type of inward-looking “clean the ranks” strategy is common to authoritarian ideological movements, but opponents of the change say it not only is ineffective, but it is not worthy of an inclusive, tolerant, freedom-loving religious movement grounded in reason, rationality, logic, evidence, science, compassion, fairness, and facts. This approach seems to be based on Robin DiAngelo’s

interpretation of critical race theory. Proponents maintain the UUism is “swimming in White Supremacy Culture” which now has been broadened to include all of Western Enlightenment.

Opponents want to shift anti-racist work away from the divisive “blame and shame” approach that considers skin color to be the defining characteristic of a person to an “asset-based” anti-racist strategy. Asset-based anti-racism contends that actual incidents of racism of every form need to be identified and all available assets of the people involved are then mobilized to eliminate them. Abandoning freedom of speech, press, association, individual expression, science-based evidence, logic, reason and other “enlightenment values” as the rewrite of Article 2 proposes, would take away the primary weapons marginalized people have always used to gain freedom and equality. Opponents of the proposed new Article 2 want to avoid “safetyism” where people are once again segregated by race with each advocating for its own cause, but instead create alliances so that black, brown, and white people all work together.⁹ Opponents tend toward the ideas and strategies of Martin Luther King rather than those of critical race theorists.

Democracy

Democracy is a crucial issue as UUs have witnessed numerous incidents of disregard for democratic processes by UU leadership.¹⁰ Rather than strengthen the commitment to democracy, the rewrite eliminates the 7 Principles and relegates the democracy commitment to a one-line statement buried within one of the values.

Freedom of Belief

The revision still has a section called “Freedom of Belief.” It says that “congregational freedom of belief and the individual’s right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist *heritage*.” (Emphasis added). That statement does not provide for a continuing commitment to freedom of belief, individual right of conscience, or to congregational freedom! The title of the section implies freedom of belief, but the text does not endorse it except as a part of UU heritage. (Slavery is also part of UU heritage.)

“Out of Covenant”

The revision requires that members covenant to “do the work” of living out the seven values rather than just “affirm and promote. UU leaders have de-fellowshipped at least two ministers on the grounds that they are “out of covenant” because of claims that books written or things said are inconsistent with UU values.¹¹ This is an insertion of authoritarianism that is completely out of step with our UU heritage.

Inclusion

The new inclusion section now limits our welcome to “all persons who share our values.” The current statement says we truly welcome all persons. Critics are unhappy with this limitation and its rejection of tolerance and inclusion which have always been hallmarks of UUism.

Inspirations

This section no longer lists the specific sources but contains only a summary. Critics prefer the specific lists from which modern Unitarian Universalism has emerged as these are themselves, a rich, thoughtful list of where we have come from and what we value. This eliminates specific mention of Christian, Jewish, earth-centered, humanist, and prophetic people.

MORE RESOURCES:

Here's a link to the "save the seven principles web site" that is trying to save the 7 principles, which are eliminated by the proposed revision.

<https://savethe7principles.org/>

Here's a link to the UUA report that supports the revisions

<https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>

¹ Originally drafted by Anne Schneider with assistance and rewrites from Karen Brown, Lincoln Baxter, Susan McWethy, Rebecca Pace, Ken Ing and others. Send corrections, suggestions to anne.schneider@asu.edu.

² The old and new text can be found on the “savingthe7principles” website along with other documents about the proposed change. Here’s the link <https://savethe7principles.org/what-is-changing/>

³ Paula Cole Jones made these remarks to the UUA Board when she presented the Commission’s work.

⁴ See the UUA Board’s charge to the Commission: <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/charge> . For an early critique of the UUAs anti-racist strategy, see “[Why Anti-Racism Will Fail](#)” by Thandeka (a black female UU minister).

⁵ These statements are recorded in Session III in the discussion of the proposed Amendment 6, Freedom of Belief and Right of Conscience.

⁶For more on the accountability concern, view this excellent, well documented, video: <https://savethe7principles.org/videos/on-accountability/>

⁷Research has shown that many of the diversity, equity, inclusion anti-racist programs, particularly those that emphasize guilt-based anti-racism are not effective in changing attitudes or behavior (see Anne L. Schneider, “The Emergence of a White Supremacy Culture in Unitarian Universalism,” and “(Dis)Continuing Racial Inequality,” (both available from amazon). On the other hand, positive, asset-based anti-racism has been shown effective, see for example: <https://assetbasedantiracism.com/> and <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273597830> Of saints and sinners How appeals to collective pride and guilt affect outgroup helping. Not all people of color embrace the “blame and shame” approach of anti-racism. See the 1997 essay by Thandeka (Why Illiberalism Will Fail); and John McWhorter, “Woke Racism” (Books are available from Amazon. Thandeka’s essay can be found with google, on or at this link: <https://files.meadville.edu/files/resources/thandeka-why-anti-racism-will-fail-447.pdf>

⁸ This basically is the anti-racist strategy advocated by Robin DiAngelo in her books, “White Fragility” and “Nice Racism” (Both available from amazon).

⁹ UUA has begun advocating for “safetyism” (segregated caucuses” and “safe spaces” during General Assembly.

¹⁰ This deserves an essay on its own. The most recent and astounding violation is the violation of the bylaws in electing the new UUA President. The bylaws require a competitive election. Instead, the Presidential Search Committee nominated only one person and Rev. Sofia Betancourt ran unopposed. In earlier years, changes that disregarded democracy or made it more difficult include the elimination of UU districts and regions that provided democratic connections within the organization; the de-fellowshipping of Rev. Todd Eklof and Rev. Kate Rohde for their disagreement with some UUA decisions especially the “confession” of being a white supremacy culture; the by-laws change that makes it extremely difficult to get enough signatures to run for UUA President by petition; and the repeated denial of a GA booth for the [Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Action Council](#) (UUMUAC). For more detail, see “Used to Be UU” by Frank Casper and Jay Kiskell, “Against Illiberalism” by David Cycleback, and Anne Schneider’s book “The Self Confessed White Supremacy Culture,” all available from Amazon.

¹¹ Rev. Todd Eklof’s de-fellowshipping over his book, “The Gadfly Papers,” (available from Amazon) is the example usually given, although Rev. Kate Rohde also has been de-fellowshipped without due process over her defense of Rev. Eklof. UUMUAC is led by Rev. Dr. Finley Campbell, PhD, a black minister whose focus is mainly on social class rather than racism and has been a long-time critic of the UUA’s anti -racist strategy.