

Is “LOVE” the Central Theological Value of Unitarian Universalism? ¹

Anne L. Schneider, PhD



The proposed revision of the Unitarian Universalist Association Article 2 not only reduces the 7 principles to a handful of clauses buried in other values and eliminates the freedom of belief commitment, but it also proposes a new set of values as the primary expression of Unitarian Universalism.² This new set of values places “LOVE” at the center of UUism in a flower diagram surrounded by six other values: equity, interdependence, justice, generosity, pluralism, and transformation. What, we might ask, does “LOVE” mean and why is it centered?³

Centering “LOVE” as a value may help align UUism with many other religions, especially Christianity, but what does LOVE actually mean in UUism? How has the Commission on the revision of Article 2 defined LOVE? Is this really the most central of all UU principles – the core of UU theology?

From a personal point of view, I have never thought to explain UUism to someone who asked about it, as a set of values with “love” as the center. I explain UUism as a religion that allows for freedom of belief, including agnostics and atheists as well as theists. I emphasize that one of our principles is a free and independent search for truth and meaning, as well as freedom of conscience and respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I usually add, if they are still listening, that we believe in justice and compassion in human relations, world peace, the interdependent web of all existence and a serious commitment to freedom of belief. I explain UUism as centered in our 7 principles.

For me, the core of UUism is the free and independent search for truth and meaning. I am not sure about truth – that is, whether there really is any absolute truth – but meaningfulness means everything to me. And the life-long search to live a meaningful life is my every-day obsession. Every day should be a special day even if that “specialness” is nothing more than hearing a mockingbird sing, jump in the air, flip

¹Link to article: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:US:36f513fa-42fd-48c3-88f6-69a0a85f959c>

²You can find the Commission’s rationale for the revision at this UUA link:

<https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>

³ For other critiques of the proposed rewrite, visit the “save the 7 principles” web site

<http://savethe7principles.org/>, the “fifth principle project site” <https://fifthprincipleproject.org/>, and <https://uutheconversation.org/>.

twice, and land again. Saying good morning to my son who lives with me. Or having coffee with a friend and sharing something special just between us. Or taking a walk around the neighborhood or perhaps climbing just a bit into the Sonoran Desert's South Mountain. Or seeing a coyote or javalina or a quail family with the chicks scurrying along between mom and dad. Even the sight of a rattlesnake or hawk can provide meaning and make my day a special one.

How are we to incorporate this new vision of UU values, with LOVE as its center, in our understanding of UUism? First, we need to find out what the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) means by "love."

Article 2 says we "draw on our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage building on the foundation of love." The core of UUism, I have always thought, is found in our freedom of belief, our tolerance for other beliefs, our capacity for reason, and our empathy which may be the most important of all human values. Yet, Article 2 says that "Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values." I am jolted by section C-2.2 when it says "We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love." The shared values are interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, generosity and justice. But what does "Love" mean? It still has no definition.

Digging deeper, I find that the charge to the committee says that Love is "love in action" and that "love in action," is anti-racism, anti-oppression, multiculturalism. Now, this is not hyperbole on my part. That is actually what the charge to the group that rewrote Article 2 says:⁴

The Board believes that one core theological value, shared widely among UUs, is love. ... Our commitment to personal, institutional and cultural change rooted in anti-oppression, anti-racism, and multiculturalism values and practices is love in action, and should be centered in any revision of Article II. ...

The new Principles and Purposes ... They 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.

⁴ You can find that quote at this link: <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/charge#:~:text=The%20Commission%20is%20charged%20with,Article%20II%20is%20laid%20out.>

That's how the presumably "core" **theological** principle of Unitarian Universalism, Love, became a social justice project, not a theological principle at all. Love actually is not the love of Christianity or of other religions, or that idea of empathy or of agape, but is the social justice priority of the UUA: anti-racism, anti-oppression, multiculturalism.

And it now has become the core theological principle of UUism. Imagine, the conversation:

Friend: I know you go to a Unitarian-Universalist church. What is UUism all about?

UU: Well, it really is all about anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism.

Friend: But, I mean, religiously. What are the core RELIGIOUS ideas?

UU: Our core value is Love.

Friend: Wonderful. But, what does "Love" mean?

UU: "Love" means "love in action" and that means anti racism, anti oppression, multiculturalism.

Friend: Oh. Are there some religious ideas in there somewhere?

Me: No. This "LOVE" is not the love found in so many religions that admonish us to be patient, kind, compassionate, humble and to love others and god. The "LOVE" centered in the proposed revision of Article 2 is a call to action – to political action. It is a worthy goal; a worthy part of a UU mission statement. But political action is not a religious value. This definition is a radical change and for me, is not a welcome direction for the future of Unitarian Universalism. UUism theology is the free and independent search for truth and meaning; it is the freedom of belief, it is appreciation for the mysteries of life itself, for the beauty of the earth and its critters, for the loving compassion of kinship and friendship, for empathy which is probably the most undervalued of all human attributes. UU theology is about us, as human beings: it is respect for all, for fairness and compassion, for our search for meaning. Surely, we can do better than this flower graphic with "LOVE" as its center to express our religious beliefs.