

# Why I Am Not a Unitarian Universalist

By

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You may have run across 20<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher Bertrand Russell's essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian," originally presented in 1927 and remains in print to this day. His rejection of Christianity is based on his intellectual objections to arguments for the existence of God, and his moral criticisms of Christianity and religion in general. In addition to being a philosopher, mathematician, logician, and Nobel laureate in literature, Russell, who died in 1970, was a vocal critic of war, religion, and authoritarianism who championed reason and intellectual freedom throughout his life. As a kindred spirit, it was Russell who inspired the title of today's sermon, "Why I Am Not a Unitarian Universalist," my reasons for which are essentially the same as were his for renouncing Christianity; I strongly disagree with the irrational and illiberal ideological turn Unitarian Universalism has taken in recent years, and am even more strongly repulsed by its authoritarian, intolerant, and unethical behavior toward others, representing the very antithesis of my deepest values. While I remain proud to be associated with the ideas and values that Unitarian Universalism inherited from its namesakes and once embraced, today I am embarrassed to have my name attached to UUism or the Unitarian Universalist Association and refer to myself only as a Unitarian, in the traditional sense.

Speaking of which, one of Russell's contemporaries, only six years younger, and another kindred spirit was John Dietrich, the father of Religious Humanism and once minister of our Spokane congregation, of whom I often speak. Only recently I revised and delivered his sermon, "Who Are These Unitarians?", originally given in 1926, only months before Russell first presented his now famous critique of Christianity. Contemplating and preparing Dietrich's sermon, in particular, brought greater clarity to my own reasons for now rejecting Unitarian Universalism, a religion that was established only as recently as 1961, which is why researchers and social scientists categorize it as an NRM, a new religious movement, even though Unitarianism and Universalism have separately existed for centuries. Sadly, the UUA has had an identity crisis ever since the Association was formed, which has only worsened over the years, to the point that today its entire reason for being seems to be for the purpose of idolizing—making idols out of and worshipping—the identities of others.

I've been speaking about these concerns for decades. In 2012, for example, only a year after I arrived in Spokane, I gave a sermon entitled, "The UU Identity Crisis: Moving Beyond Our Denominational Adolescence," in which I stated, "we still haven't come to thoroughly agree upon what it is about us that holds all our values and differences together. We've been exploring a few different identities but haven't yet committed to any." A simple "elevator speech" explaining what Unitarian Universalism is, remains as elusive as a high-resolution image of a bigfoot or UFO. Yet, when Dietrich gave his sermon in 1926, 35 years before the UUA was formed, he provided a one sentence definition of Unitarianism with clarity and ease. "Religious freedom accompanied by Unitarianism simply asserts that any[one], white

or black, rich or poor, ignorant or educated, Jew or Gentile, bond or free, Christian or Pagan, orthodox or heterodox, theist or atheist, is entitled to think as he sees fit and yet not be denied the right of religious fellowship.”

More simply stated, *Unitarians come together regardless of any differences because of our common devotion to freedom of thought*. I put it this way because it puts the primary emphasis on freedom of thought; the fundamental principle that draws and keeps us together. But soon after its inception, the Unitarian Universalist Association began emphasizing the “differences” part, as if these are what bring and keep us together. Right from its start in 1961, the UUA began assessing itself in an attempt to figure out what this new religious movement was going to be about. (As a side, having recently begun the North American Unitarian Association—NAUA—based explicitly upon the principles of freedom, reason, tolerance, and human dignity, it’s difficult for me to grasp how an organization like the UUA could have formed without fully understanding what it was going to be about to begin with.) In 1963, it published the results of its assessment in a report entitled, *The Free Church in a Changing World*. According to historian David Robinson, it suggested “a pattern of increasing religious pluralism, [and] a simultaneous need to discuss consensus, or identity, within that pluralism.”<sup>1</sup> There’s that word, “identity,” suggesting the identity crisis I’ve long spoken about began with the UUA’s inception.

More importantly, by emphasizing our many differences, the report failed to focus on freedom of thought as Unitarianism’s foundational, historic, and defining quality. It even goes on to disparage the idea that this was enough to base its New Religious Movement on. In the report’s concluding remarks, Rev. Paul N. Carnes, who was later elected to lead the UUA, stated, “religious liberalism has little to meet the challenge of today’s need, or win our own personal need, if all it offers is a casual ‘Join us and you can believe anything you want to’—as if religious convictions were to be left to such ephemeral judges as whim and wish!”<sup>2</sup>

In 1961, the UUA started another survey in a new attempt to figure itself out. The results, published in 1967, based on responses from over 12,000 members from 800 congregations, indicated that less than 3 percent claimed to believe in a “supernatural being,” 28 percent considered God “an irrelevant concept,” 57 percent did not consider theirs a “Christian” religion, and 52 percent preferred “a distinctive humanistic religion.”<sup>3</sup> I take this to mean, most Unitarians, or UUs, as they were increasingly called, didn’t simply believe anything they wanted based on “whim and wish,” as Carnes complained, but took what they chose to believe seriously enough to apply sound reason to their thinking. Forty years later, however, such consensus had vanished, as indicated by a 2005 survey that simply asked, “What holds us together?” Participants responded by saying things like, “It’s the support network,”<sup>4</sup> “the UU movement [is] an interreligious dialogue,”<sup>5</sup> “you have CUUPS and the Buddhists and the Christians and all these little subgroups—because we offer the hope of a spiritual journey, and we offer no tools to do it with,”<sup>6</sup> “I’m no longer convinced that you can have the omni-

inclusive church, you can have the one-size-fits-all church, or even the one-size-fits-all denomination.”<sup>7</sup> With a tone of defeat, the report concludes, “Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, *we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly.*”<sup>8</sup> It’s like saying “we know our message is important, we just don’t know what it is.”

It's sad enough that the founders of the UUA began their new religion with little idea and less conviction about its purpose. A flaw, as the evidence I've presented shows, that's led to decades of increasing confusion about this fledgling offshoot of a much older religion that was once profoundly committed to and confident of its belief in freedom of thought, the only means by which people of diverse opinion can live, and work, and worship together. Our religion was never supposed to be about diversity but about the freedom that leads to diversity. But the UUA has forgotten, if not discarded, this oldest and most fundamental tenant of our liberal religion, the very thing that draws and binds us together.

The UUA included a list of six statements in its founding bylaws, which were slightly altered and a seventh statement added in 1985. For many UUs, these seven principles articulated their religion perfectly. I like them and consider them an adequate, although wordy, articulation of our values. Yet I have long been troubled that they were scribed within the UUA's bylaws, which is supposed to be a service organization, not a religious denomination. Here's what Dietrich said of its predecessor, the American Unitarian Association (AUA), in the aforementioned sermon, “This organization is without ecclesiastical authority whatever. It is simply an association of free and independent churches for purely missionary purposes, using annual contributions from the churches and income from the trust funds ... for publishing books and tracts, sustaining missionaries in new fields, aiding feeble churches, and planting new ones.” He also said, “Unitarianism cannot be viewed historically from the standpoint of a type of thought and that no [one] can speak authoritatively of the doctrines of Unitarianism; and Unitarianism cannot be judged by the teaching of any individual society, because each society has the perfect right to formulate for itself any creative desires, to practice any ritual it pleases, and to establish any policy it sees fit.”

So, the only proper place for any articulation of our religious liberal principles is within the local congregation, as determined by its members. Since 1985, however, too many have come to treat those seven principles like our version of a creed. While I agree they are worthy of setting aside for consideration and inspiration now and then, so are a lot of other writings. Unitarianism should not treat any writing as the final summation of our religion, nor agree upon one set of principles housed within the bylaws of a national service organization. Alas, if this were my only worry about the UUA, it would merely be a point worth raising in a sermon now and then, as I have sometimes done, or in discussions with other religious professionals. But it's by no means a dealbreaker for me.

What is a dealbreaker is JETPIG, the acronym for the seven euphemisms that recently replaced the seven principles. JETPIG stands for *justice, equity, transformation, pluralism, interdependence, and generosity* with *love* as their core. The UUA's most recent newsletter says, "We must be intentional about moving fear out of the center and replacing it with love—over and over again—as often as necessary." The UUA's President then says, "May we do this work of centering love—connected as a faith and in our own communities." *Centering love in all we do* is the new mantra of the UUA. Love is not a bad word. Indeed, it has already been claimed as the core tenant of other religions, including Christianity and Buddhism. But love is so vague as to be almost meaningless if it's not well defined; and has often been used to justify all manners of evil.

More, importantly, from our perspective as religious liberals, it is not our defining principle no matter how sweet its ring. The UUA newsletter begins by saying, "We know that our ministries unfold in challenging and complex times." This is so, but nebulous love is not what is needed for us to meet these challenges. As Dietrich said, "We are needed today as never before—and no fear of denominationalism, no sentimental love of church unity, no 'mush of concession,' as Emerson phrased it, must be allowed to turn us from the task which is this day laid upon our shoulders." The reason we are needed today now more than ever is not because of some sugary sanctimonious word that has been failing as a religious core for 2,000 years, but because, as Dietrich further stated, "We must proclaim to [people] everywhere that here in our Unitarianism fold is a place where they may follow truth to its uttermost bounds and still enjoy the privilege of religious fellowship."

All of this explains my ideological differences with what has become of the UUA. It is a religion that no longer emphasizes nor values the part of liberal religion that makes it liberal—liberty— "the principle of religious freedom." Indeed, so many of the terms once definitive of liberalism—words like freedom, reason, independence, democracy, individuality, dignity—have been positioned obscurely and out of context buried within the UUA's bylaws or removed altogether. Since it has, after 65 years, finally defined what a Unitarian Universalist is, with a definition that has nothing to do with its liberal heritage, nothing to do with a fundamental commitment to freedom of thought and belief, it is not a liberal organization and I, therefore, am not a Unitarian Universalist.

Still, based on its short history, I consider what's happened to the UUA to have been inevitable, not intentional, or malicious. By focusing on the "diversity" part of the equation, rather than on "freedom," it increasingly became an Association in search of a common core, not realizing it already had one. This created an opportunity for opportunists who, over the past few decades, limited the Association's once-expensive democratic governance into the hands of a small number of individuals who now control the organization and make it essentially impossible for anyone to run against the leaders they preselect. It's one of the worst examples of institutional capture I know of, which begins to get us into the ethical reasons for which I can no longer, in good conscience, consider myself a Unitarian Universalist. If becoming so undemocratic weren't troubling enough, its intolerance toward

and bullying of those who openly disagree with the illiberal direction the Association has taken leaves me with no choice but to dissociate from it.

As you know, I wrote a book about my concerns, which I began freely distributing at the UUA's annual General Assembly in 2019. Within hours, I was corralled into a corner by five UUA representatives complaining about the terrible "harm" my book was causing, though none of them had read it. When I got home that evening, I received a phone call from another representative instructing me not to return to GA. 24 hours later, more than 300 UU ministers (eventually more than 500) issued a public letter condemning me and my book, which few if any could have read, as racist, homo- and transphobic, ableist, and classist. A month later I received a letter of censure from the UU Ministers' Association repeating these assertions without citing a single example. At the same time, I received notice from Meadville-Lombard Theological School, where I earned my Doctorate, that my position as an adjunct professor had been terminated, without explanation. By the end of a year, I was officially disfellowshipped by the UUA for being a noncooperative, abusive bully. (They have recently removed "abusive bully" from my name, without explanation. One would think that an ethical organization would have issued some sort of apology for having falsely and publicly defamed my character.)

More disturbing, during that tumultuous year, UUA officials were routinely and secretly meeting with a small number of those within our Spokane congregation in a joint effort to force me out, which is a violation of its own code of ethics. I stumbled upon one of these meetings and was told by our Board President at the time, visibly shaken by my intrusion, that I could not attend. We've also since discovered an email regarding the UUA's Executive Vice President who met with our board to discuss how best to terminate me. When this effort failed, those wishing me gone, after also failing to overturn our own board elections, abruptly left and immediately went to the local press to falsely disparage our church, then attempted to form their own UU fellowship. In less than a year, during the COVID lockdown at that, the UUA officially recognized it as a breakout church serving the Inland Northwest. Not only was this unprecedented after such a short time, especially for a group that had never even met in person, it was against the UUA's own rules about contacting the existing areas congregation before making such a decision, especially one established after a split. And that's what bothers me most about this period; the UUA had rules in place that required its leaders to prioritize for the welfare of our congregation. Instead, they used us for their own means, willing to cause whatever damage necessary just to get rid of me. They had the tools and rules to help keep us together, but they didn't care about our welfare as congregation anymore than they cared about my dignity as an individual. If that's what "centering love" means, I want no part of it.

In his 1926 sermon, Dietrich said, "each Unitarian society guarantees its minister absolute freedom of thought and expression," a Unitarian principle that dates back to the Edict of Torda in 1568. Indeed, between 1961 and 2020, when I became the first minister ever disfellowshipped as an abusive bully, the UUA had permanently disfellowshipped only eight ministers, seven for sexual misconduct and one for financial maleficence—legitimate

reasons. Between 2020 and today, five years compared to nearly six decades, there have been eight of us disfellowship on charges like “bullying and abusive behavior,” “noncooperation,” and creating “hostile work environments.” The most recent was removed for “bullying and abusive behaviors in the workplace,” that is, for being a boss, which is a congregational matter and has nothing to do with the UUA. But now, a disgruntled employee complains to the UUA and it acts like it’s an independent congregation’s personnel department. This authoritarian overreach, and more troubling, the removal of ministers for simply saying things others disagree with, labeling their comments as bullying, abusive, or hostile, violates our liberal religion’s first and most sacred principles, freedom of the pulpit and the independence of the local congregation.

Finally, in recent years the UUA has, in my opinion, been bullying small congregations that rebel against its illiberal behavior. One is a newly formed small fellowship that split off from a large congregation in protest of what’s been happening. The other is an established church that recently left the UUA over these matters. Both received legalistic, threatening “cease and desist” letters from the Association’s Executive Vice President claiming the UUA owns the rights to the terms “Unitarian Universalism,” to the “seven principles,” even to the image of a “chalice.” The most recent letter claimed a congregation was causing “irreparable harm” to the UUA and must not only immediately stop using the UUA’s specific trademark but must also stop using the term “Unitarian Universalist” altogether. Without the resources to wage a legal battle of any sort, this caused the congregation to shut down its Facebook page and other communication mediums for fear of being sued. While it can claim the rights to its specific mark, it is highly unlikely it can claim the right to “Unitarian Universalism,” let alone to any image of a chalice or to the seven principles, which it has abandoned. But the question now is who’s doing the bullying? Ministers and members who protest the UUA’s illiberal direction, or the UUA which has become extremely intolerant of criticism and questions?

A couple of weeks ago I participated in a public demonstration raising awareness about the threat to freedom and democracy in our nation. I noticed a few people there who had been part of the splinter group that left our church in 2020. One of them had written us a note saying they would stop contributing to our church because we no longer represent their values. This same person once met with me and asked that I renounce my book to “heal” the rift in our church. I said, as I said to many at the time, “If healing the church is its priority, it needs to find another minister. My job is to uphold our liberal values while I’m here.” Another individual “marching for freedom” had overtly stated that I should never have written my book without the congregation’s input and approval. This, despite a clause in Ministerial Agreement stating, “It is a basic premise of this Congregation that the pulpit is free and untrammelled. The Minister is expected to express his values, views, and commitments without fear or favor.” When I spotted them at the demonstration, I wondered why it was okay to protest a Republican threat to our freedoms, but not an internal threat within our own religion, just to keep the peace?

Jesus is reported to have said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword ... to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.” I doubt if Jesus ever said this, but I appreciate the sentiment. There are a few lines in the sand we must stand behind and protect. As a religious liberal, especially as a Unitarian, especially as the minister of the Unitarian Church of Spokane, established in 1887, whose “First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy,”<sup>9</sup> the church of Rev. Edwin Wheelock, our first minister, who came to us with a bounty on his head for preaching in favor of abolition, and of the convicted heretic Rev. John Dietrich, and of Rev. Rudy Gilbert who was among the very first preachers brave enough to use this pulpit to speak against the Vietnam War, and of Rev. William Houff who used it to take on the Federal Government that was secretly exposing people to radiation at the Hanford Nuclear Production Facility, I can no longer count myself as a Unitarian Universalist, on the ideological grounds I have mentioned, but most importantly because it’s intolerant, bullying, and abusive behavior in recent years has come to represent the very antithesis of what we have long considered, as Dietrich said, “The very foundation stone of the Unitarian faith ... the belief that truth should be taken as authority and not authority as truth.”

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA, Boston, MA, May 2005, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Winston, Carlton, *Circle of the Earth*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, NY, 1942, p. 123.