

## God as Principle

by

Todd F. Eklof

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In a sermon entitled *Why "Unitarian Universalism" is Dying*, delivered earlier this year during the Southern Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, the Reverend Davidson Loehr, minister of the First UU Church in Austin, Texas, cited our seven UU principles as part of the reason our denomination is failing to grow. During his message, Reverend Loehr pointed out that some even sarcastically refer to these principles as the "Seven Banalities" or the "Seven Dwarfs." He says they "snuck" into our religion, first through a religious curriculum designed for children, then throughout our denomination via the booklet entitled, *What Unitarians Believe: An Introduction to the Seven Principles*, endorsed by ministers John Wolf and F. Forester Church. Loehr says, "These were good ministers, but they did a very bad thing. In the midst of a religious vacuum, they exalted the social and political profile of the seekers rather than the depth or ontological power of the religious center that was being sought—which means that center was no longer being sought, and the seekers were now learning to be pleased with themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in 2003, quite a hornet's nest was stirred up within our denomination when UU President Bill Sinkford was misquoted by a Texas newspaper, claiming he wants to put the word "God" into a new statement of principles. In truth, Sinkford simply expressed his concern that perhaps our current statement isn't enough to sufficiently capture the wide variety of religious and spiritual experiences we as individual UU's discover as we search for depth and meaning. Borrowing a term expressed by Reverend David Bambaugh in the March/April issue of UU World, Sinkford went on to suggest we may need a "vocabulary of reverence."<sup>2</sup> According to an article in the Charlotte Observer a month later Sinkford was further quoted as saying our principles "contain no hint of the holy," and that "we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms."<sup>3</sup>

As you will recall, the principles both Loehr and Sinkford refer to are written as follows in our denominational bylaws:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

The free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society and large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I for one am stunned that my ministerial colleagues find these statements detrimental to our religious identity and too inadequate to foster and express personal spirituality. These values, around which so many of us rally, reek with reverent language and, far from a mere hint, are overflowing with holiness! These values recognize the worth and dignity of everyone, even as they call upon us to treat all people justly, as equals, and with compassion. They call upon us to foster accepting and encouraging communities, as we quest together for truth, for meaning, for our higher purpose and calling in a world starving for people of good conscience, willing to devote their lives to the spread of true democracy for everyone on earth, including men, women and children, the poor as well as the rich, the disinherited as well as the powerful. These values inspire us to strive toward a world in which peace, justice and liberty abound not only for all people, but for all creatures and all of creation as well, in the full recognition of our intimate and sacred relationship with all that is. In my opinion, it is not our principles that are lacking, but we who too often lack the passion and devotion required to live out these values everyday in every moment of our lives.

Still, some would complain that these principles falsely replace our religious need for a personal god. Perhaps this is what Loehr means when he says our principles "exalt the social and political profile of the seekers rather than the depth or ontological power of the religious center... being sought." For me, however, the problem with focusing upon, or, more honestly, worshipping a personal god, or an "ontological power," as Loehr puts it, is that we sometimes mistake our need for a personal God as the person of God, which becomes idolatry, not because we worship a statue or image, but because we transform that which guides us through darkness and mystery, depicted as an ever changing fire and a mystifying cloud in the Exodus story, into a concrete definition. Traditional Christian doctrine has done this very thing, for example, by characterizing God as a person who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Although this unique being happens to be all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present, like most persons, *he* (because God is portrayed as male in traditional Christianity) seems to spend his time planning for the future, making sure, as best he can, given our frailties and failings, that we do what we must to make his schemes come true.

This is what happens when we don't resist the temptation to turn our personal gods into a person of God, into a definition of God. To do so, furthermore, may indicate that we are operating at an inferior stage of moral development. The classic stages of moral development, according to the Harvard Professor of psychology, the late Lawrence Kohlberg, are the *Pre-conventional*, *Conventional*, and *Post-Conventional*. The *Pre-conventional Level* is characterized by behavior that is motivated by the anticipation of

personal pleasure or pain, which leads to the theological understanding of God as a being who punishes or rewards us according to how well we obey it—with heaven or hell, for instance. At level two, the *Conventional Level*, we behave with a little more regard for others, rather than merely out of personal interests because we realize it's easier to get along in society this way—the same way children learn to get along by sharing or taking turns. At this level our theology reflects the conventional, popular view so that we don't find ourselves ostracized by our friends and family, or by society at large. At the highest level of moral development, however, we get completely away from our self-centered and conventional ideas of God by evolving toward the notion that God is more like a set of Universal principles rather than an actual person who sits around thinking about how to control all his unruly children. Jesus, for instance, said "God is Love," just as others might conclude, *God is truth, God is merciful, God is just.*

We see this process outlined wonderfully in Erich Fromm's classic book, *The Art of Loving*. In it he discusses the human progression away from a patriarchal conception of God in which, in his words, God is "a despotic, jealous God, who considers [people] whom he created, as his property, and is entitled to do with [them] whatever he pleases."<sup>4</sup> Fromm understood that over time this concept evolved so that people, at least in the Western tradition, entered into a covenant relationship with God, in which God was also bound to treat human beings justly, not destroying them with a flood or with fire and brimstone, as long as they behaved themselves, "transforming God," in his words, "from the figure of a despotic tribal chief into a loving father."<sup>5</sup>

From here, according to Fromm, people began associating God with the principles God is supposed to uphold—principles like truth, justice and love. "In this development," he writes, "God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; he becomes the symbol of the principle of unity behind the manifoldness of phenomena..."<sup>6</sup> We see in Fromm's theory of theological evolution, a transition similar to Kohlberg's three stages of moral development, the pre-conventional, in which God can do whatever God wants, the conventional, in which God has to learn to get along better with human beings by obeying a few rules, and the post-conventional in which God is no longer a person, but the very principles God is associated with.

Gandhi, who unquestionably operated at the highest stage of human morality, the post-conventional, did not believe in God as a person. "God is not a person," he said, "God is a force."<sup>7</sup> This force, Gandhi believed, is the principle he called "Truth," which can only be discovered through *ahimsa*, non-violence. "Truth is God,"<sup>8</sup> he said. Yet even though his faith was in God as a principle rather than God as a person, Gandhi was no less sure of his convictions than the most devout fundamentalist. "I am surer of [God's] existence than of the fact that you and I are sitting in this room," he once said, "You may pluck out my eyes, but that cannot kill me. But blast my belief in God, and I am dead."<sup>9</sup>

In some ways, Unitarian Universalists are more like Fromm than Gandhi, in that we don't even like to make references to the Divine using the word "God," which may really be what good folks like Loehr and Sinkford are getting at. And this is understandable given the horrors with which the word is used by individuals operating at stage one

morality, who accept or reject others solely upon their definition of God, and by entire cultures operating at stage two that are willing to deny rights, respect, freedom and sometimes life to those citizens or foreigners who question cultural convention. The problem emerges, however, when, because we refuse to evoke the name of "God" at all, we forget that the world is Divine and each of us plays a Divine role in it. We forget that we have the right, if not obligation, to seek out those principles to which we must dedicate our lives with devotion greater than the greatest saint, to which we must cling to more assuredly than the most fundamental of fundamentalists.

What I am suggesting in all this is that our very principles reflect the highest sort of theological evolution. Just because we don't believe in a person named God, and are often loathe to use the word "God" at all, doesn't necessarily mean we are godless, and, in fact, may indicate we have reached a higher level of theological awareness than is indicative of other denominations. With those great religious teachers like Jesus and Gandhi who knew God as principle, we Unitarian Universalists can proudly stand.

God is the inherent worth and dignity of every person;

God is Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;

God is acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

God is a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

God is the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society and large;

God is the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;

God is respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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1 <http://austinuu.org/sermons/2004/2004-07-21-WhyUnitarianUniversalismisDying.html>

2 Bambaugh, David, UU World, March/April 2003, p.9.

3 See Unitarian Leader Stirs up Debate, by Kevin Eckstrom, The Charlotte Observer, 4 May 31, 2003.

4 Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 57.

5 Ibid., p.58.

6 Ibid.

7 Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, ed., Krishna Kripalani, Continuum Publishing Corp., New York, NY, 1980, p.59.

8 Ibid., p.61.

9 Ibid., p.62.