



# **Theological Reflection on the Proposed Revision to Article II**

by

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In reflecting on the interplay of Unitarian Universalism's theological heritage and the shared values from the proposed revision of Article II, I offer some pieces, like those of a patchwork quilt, that don't aim to be an end unto themselves but a beginning. I hope they will inspire your engagement with our theological heritage and our contemporary expressions of Unitarian Universalism. In a patchwork quilt, each piece of fabric contains a story in itself – where, when, and how it was made; what other garment or fabric it was once part of; who created and touched the fabric. Sewn together, the quilt collectively tells other stories and goes on to be part of yet more stories in the lives of the many beings who interact with it.

In piecing together our theological heritage as Unitarian Universalists, we draw from many sources. There are text-based sources passed down through the years – the written works of sermons, essays, and books. For some of us, it is easy to get pulled into an exclusive relationship with the written word and forget the myriad other sources for theological reflection, as my colleague Dr. Takiyah Amin recently reminded me. We can also draw from the lived experiences of Unitarian Universalists, the architecture of our churches, the music and hymns we invoke in worship, the patterns and habits of our lives, our organizations, and our histories.

Some of us grapple with the very notion of theology. Dr. Anthony Pinn, a contemporary humanist theologian influential in Unitarian Universalism, can be helpful here. In his book, *The End of God Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*, he writes, "Theology is a method for critically engaging, articulating, and discussing the deep existential and ontological issues endemic to human life." In naming the subject of theology as the deepest questions of existence and of being, both inextricably woven into human life, Pinn helps us break free from the false but often touted idea that theology is solely the study of God, as the Greek roots of the word might lead us to conclude. Theology is about what it means to be human in the cosmos, how we are related to all that is, including that which we hold to be most sacred.

I believe that the clearer we are about our shared theological perspectives as Unitarian Universalists, the easier it is for us to come together across differences in shared purpose in our religious communities. I offer you the following theological reflections from the perspective of my layered identities as a white, American, cisgender, lesbian, upper middle class, woman, mother, daughter, Unitarian Universalist minister, theologian, and educator who currently does not have a disability. May these pieces be only the beginnings of many quilts of theological reflection and discussion on the proposed revision to Article II.

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### Love

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

The great Universalist heresy – the one that so threatened evangelical and Calvinist groups in New England in the late 18th and early 19th century that they vehemently opposed it, denying Universalist preachers access to their pulpits and to positions of public power – was that the nature of God is Love. This love, embedded in the fabric of the universe, was strong, nurturing, and inclusive. It would not let go of anyone, ever. Grounded in this love, Universalists rejected any ideas of an afterlife that ultimately separated humankind into the “saved” and the “damned.” They rejected the violence and cruelty inherent in traditional notions of atonement which understood God as having ordained Jesus to suffer and die on behalf of humanity. Instead, with salvation as a given, the locus of religiosity became this world, rather than the next, among these people. The Universalists focused on the process of living as one of coming into greater alignment with love as a response to the unshakable foundation of knowing one was already, completely held in Love.

Following a similar thread, the early Unitarians in 19th century New England held an understanding of religious life as one of growing the soul towards likeness to God, whom they also understood as loving. They understood love as one of the capacities of the soul inherent in every human being. They did not suggest their parishioners should remove themselves from society in lives of contemplation and prayer, but rather that they “unfold the divine likeness” within themselves through the daily activities of living.

Through the years, Unitarian Universalists have broadened and, in some cases, released notions of God or the divine in religious life. We have troubled the imperialism toward which Universalism leans. We have embraced ever-widening understandings of who is included in the “divine likeness.” We have deepened our critiques of images of God that condone patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and violence. But we have held fast to Love. We affirm the power of Love to heal what is broken, to hold us together across pluralities of diverse religious practices and beliefs, to hold us when things fall apart, to grow our capacities, and to guide us as we return again and again in our families and communities to side with Love.



### **Interdependence**

We honor the interdependent web of all existence.  
With reverence for the great web of life and with humility,  
we acknowledge our place in it

I discussed earlier the Universalists' understanding of a common destiny for all life after death, thus shifting the focus of religious life to this world here and now. Reverence follows this shift in focus. We nurture and rest our bodies not on a disposable planet, but on holy ground. We understand our bodies to be made up of the same stuff as the Earth and the stars, and we cherish our bodies and the body of the Earth.

In our affirmation of the interdependent web of all existence, we can also trace the profound integration of science in our theological heritage. In both Universalism and Unitarianism, ideas most visibly proclaimed in the 19th century by the Transcendentalists were initially resisted but then later embraced. They were influenced by critical interpretations of the Bible, the burgeoning fields of biology and other sciences, and by Eastern religions. Among their many contributions, the Transcendentalists asserted that we could know more about God and the nature of existence by turning to the awe-inspiring beauty of the natural world and to the insights of science. They understood the non-human world to be more than inert matter moved by a mechanistic play of forces, but rather animated by a life force, a spark of the divine. One 19th century Universalist and Unitarian minister on the Pacific Coast went so far as to preach that we humans had been invited as guests into the community of all life that was God's home. Many of the nature conservation movements of the late 19th century and 20th century in the United States can trace their roots to this theological heritage. While we can be proud of these contributions, as love and reverence for the life systems of the Earth are needed perhaps now more than ever, we can also be rightfully critical of the accompanying imperialism, colonialism, and white-world making that caused great harm to indigenous peoples who had known these truths and tended these lands as home for hundreds of thousands of years. Many of our Universalist and Unitarian forebears viewed humans of European heritage, particularly Protestant Christian ones, as closer to God and thus at an apex of all life. We have since declared correctives to this arrogance, though we are still a long way from making effective reparations for all that was taken and lost.



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While acknowledging this tragedy and complexity, we have the Universalists and Unitarians of the 19th century to thank for solidifying the place of science as a foundational source of our theology. As science has helped us to understand the radically interconnected nature of all existence as well as humankind's utter dependence on the health of the Earth's ecosystems from the microscopic to the massive for our very survival, our theology has evolved and our understanding of humankind's place in it has

become more right-sized. In addition, increasing religious plurality in our congregations has brought in perspectives and practices from earth-based religions of many kinds, amplifying an understanding of humankind as one part of a great interconnected web of all existence and deepening our humility and reverence for the web of life. This core value of interdependence in Unitarian Universalism as informed by our unique theological heritage has a vital role to play in a time when all humans of power and means in industrialized countries are needed to take action to curb global heating to avert the worst scenarios of suffering and harm.

### **Pluralism**

**We celebrate that we are all sacred beings,  
diverse in culture, experience, and theology**

From the three theological moves our forebears made that I discussed above – understanding there to be a divine spark in all beings; understanding God's love to embrace all and refusing to separate humankind after death into different groups; and turning to the world, human experience, and other religions of the world as sources of our evolving theological perspective – our theology eventually grew to embrace a pluralism that those same forebears might not have thought imaginable. We declare that there are many paths to the sacred. We hold fast to the notion that one religion does not hold all the truth for all time, not even Unitarian Universalism. We maintain that a free, open, and respectful dialogue is one of the primary ways our theological perspectives evolve and grow.

Liberal theology's intellectual historian Rev. Dr. Gary Dorrien explains in the third volume of his collection on American liberal theology that the striking achievement of liberal theology in the later part of the twentieth century was its expansion in diversity and enfolding of pluralism. The incorporation of theological perspectives arising from previously marginalized and silenced voices was central to the development of progressive theology. In some mainline Protestant churches, this resulted in academic theology being dramatically out of step with congregational life and practice. While this was true for a time in Unitarian Universalist congregations, the tide turned more quickly.



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We find evidence in the statement of purposes and principles adopted by the general assembly in the 1980s and the ongoing development into the 21st century of worship and educational efforts aimed at all ages of the lifespan that celebrate pluralism, multiculturalism, and work to counter anything that inhibits either the free and responsible search for truth and meaning or the embrace of our differences and commonalities with love, curiosity, and respect.

### **Justice**

#### **We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive**

Early Universalist theologians in America argued that believing Jesus' death on the cross saved humanity harmed the spirit of God and indeed allowed people to imitate this violent behavior and justified cruelty. Instead, they believed humans are saved by creative and active Love. Unitarians joined them in believing humans need protection not from a vengeful God but from human capacity to create hell for one another on earth. The Unitarians also understood it as an affront to God when human beings were not afforded opportunities to develop fully their God-given capacities or what they called the powers of the soul. Salvation, then, is in our hands. The religious responsibility of the faithful is to remove and dismantle the systems and structures that prevent the full flourishing of life and to enhance and side with the movement of creative and active love.

These theological perspectives led Universalists and Unitarians to be at the forefront of many social movements including abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, better treatment for prisoners and people with mental illness, opposing Chinese exclusion and Japanese internment, Civil Rights, pacifism, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender rights. At the same time, the implications of this theological heritage were not integrated by all in the same way, and in every generation, there were Universalists and Unitarians on the opposite side of many movements for social reform as well as those who advocated for Eugenics, colonialism and imperialism, and the decimation of indigenous Americans and their way of life. In our congregations, our theological perspectives can be observed in the ways we organize as a religious community, protesting patterns that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few. Our congregations retain the power to self-organize and call their own clergy. We rely on democratic processes in our decision making, and we practice rotation of leadership in the governance of our congregations and our denominational association.



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In the Unitarian Universalism of the 21st century, we hold a variety of beliefs about how and whether humans co-create on earth with God (known by many names and by none fully known, as one of my students recently began a prayer) or as humans alone, but we carry forth the theological lineage that understands it is our responsibility to dismantle the human made systems of oppression and exploitation that cause harm to life and inhibit the full flourishing of every person. We do this toward creating just, compassionate, and sustainable communities where all can thrive. As the preface to the 2020 Report of the UUA's Commission on Institutional Change, Widening the Circle of Concern, makes clear, we still have a great distance to travel to live fully into this value mandated by our theological heritage, but we are on the path.

### **Transformation**

#### **We adapt to the changing world**

One of the hallmarks of liberal religion, Unitarian Universalism included, is the idea that revelation is not sealed. That is to say, our religion can and will change by the discovery or unveiling of new truths and new ways of understanding all existence and the sacred. At its core, then, our theological heritage proclaims an abiding openness to change. From our early roots in Universalist and Unitarian Christianity; through the blossoming of humanism and ongoing dialogue with scientific developments; to the re-emergence of a sense of spirituality in creative interplay with humanism, process theology, liberation theologies, and religious naturalism; to a religious pluralism that embraces traditions and practices emerging from the organic multireligiosity of Unitarian Universalists today – Unitarian Universalism has evolved in the context of a changing American and global society and in response to new insights from an ever widening circle of voices and perspectives.

In a way that mirrors the openness of our tradition as a whole to change, Universalists and Unitarians also understand every person not to be fixed in belief, capacity, or ethical orientation. Early Unitarians and Universalists moved away from the Christian catechism as the primary vehicle for religious education towards an emphasis on drawing out the capacities, insights, questions, and understandings of children and adults. This orientation to religious education continued through the 20th and 21st centuries. In a spiral-like fashion that is never perfect and never finished, we pay attention and learn from experience; reflect on it religiously – supported by engagement in religious community; respond and act in the world; and repeat the cycle. Our religious communities at their best are places where we grow our capacities to be with experience in all its complexity and paradox, to listen deeply to one another, to allow ourselves to be seen and held in love, and to respond creatively and collectively. Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, emerita professor of theology and former president of Starr King School for the



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Ministry, has asserted that the spiritual practice at the center of Unitarian Universalism is education. Transformation characterizes Unitarian Universalist religious life as we grow spiritually and ethically throughout the lifespan.

### **Generosity**

#### **We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope**

In a theological framework which understands that this world is the locus of the holy, that struggle and salvation are present here and now, and that all life is sacred and interconnected, generosity, gratitude, and hope are ways we honor these truths and the blessings of our lives. More than in any writings of theologians, we know this value as central to our theological heritage through the lives of Universalists, Unitarians, and Unitarian Universalists through the centuries. Though I could choose from thousands of stories, here are a few: Unitarian poet, essayist, and novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's (1825-1911) tireless work for abolition, temperance, and civil rights for Black people, women, and children; Annie Bissell Jordan Willis' (1893-1977) career in education - she was a teacher who carried on as the principal of the Universalist founded Suffolk Normal School in Virginia after the death of her father, the Universalist minister Joseph Fletcher Jordan, educating hundreds of Black children through decades when they were denied education in Virginia's public schools; Unitarian minister Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha's efforts in 1939-1940, providing food and means of escape for thousands of Jews, intellectuals, and children in Prague, Lisbon, and southern France. Our tradition is brimming with stories of countless women, men, non-binary, and trans people of all cultural backgrounds who have given generously of themselves in service to others in large and small ways.

Given this orientation prevalent throughout our theological heritage, I will also name the paradox in current Unitarian Universalism that many among us are not as generous as we could be with our financial resources when it comes to our congregations, theological schools, and denominational bodies. Many of our institutions are struggling financially while demographically our members, on average, tend to be well-off. In an era when it is becoming clear that industrialized nations under a system of global corporation-controlled capitalism need to change quickly and dramatically for the benefit of all life, we will be called to experience generosity, gratitude, and hope in new ways.

In practicing generosity, gratitude, and active hope we experience our interconnectedness, the ways we are not isolated beings but held in a vast web of connections and field of life, blessed by gifts beyond our own making.



### **Equity**

**We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness**

In naming equity as a core value, we come full circle. In our theological heritage, Universalists, Unitarians, and Unitarian Universalists understand every person to be held in Love and an interdependent web of existence. We understand every person to possess a spark of the divine in a cosmos where all life is sacred. We understand this world, among these people to be the locus of religious life. We understand there is a mandate emerging from our theological heritage to dismantle the structures and systems which silence, harm, and exploit human beings and the varied ecosystems of our planet as well as to work to create just and sustainable communities without barriers to belonging in our communities for all those who share our values and theological perspectives. We understand that it is ours to do – to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities where every person can flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that our theological heritage, as our present, is filled with paradox, contradiction, failures, successes, short-comings, and brilliant aspirations. The patchwork quilt of our theological heritage is torn and fraying in places, and it is stunningly vibrant in others. Some sections have been mended or wholly replaced. Articulating theology as well as living in religious community is a messy business. As we mature spiritually as a tradition and as people, we develop our capacities to be with the broken and the beautiful, the contradictions and the complexities. As the Unitarian Universalist Association's current president, Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt said in the 2018 Service of the Living Tradition and reprinted at the beginning of the chapter on theology in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, "We are on a journey toward redemption ... with the strength of generations, the failure of the everyday, and the deep-down gritty messiness that is the promise of our salvation. There is inherent goodness that exists between and among us. I want to honor the weary, ragged miracle that is our living tradition." With love stitched in from the beginning and sewn throughout the piecing and the mending across the decades, even a worn and ragged quilt provides strength, inspiration, courage, and solace through the long night.