

In this post, I will try to summarize what I see as the arguments pro and con the proposed revisions to Article II.

Overall, I find the arguments against to be stronger. I think that we should vote the proposal down, and start over again with a different approach, which is more likely to lead to a better Article II than trying to amend the proposed revision. I have some ideas for a better alternative.

First the arguments against, which are three-fold: (1) Uninspiring and overly-verbose writing; (2) watering down the principles; (3) omitting the specific sources.

(1) Writing style and overall impression. The Board of the UUA appropriately called on the Article II Study Commission to propose an Article II that is "inspirational, memorable, and poetic". They noted that "one steady criticism over decades has been that the language of the principles is not poetic."

I don't know how one PROVES the following statement, but I do not find the revision to be at all poetic or inspirational. I find it to be LESS poetic and inspirational than the current Article II.

Part of the issue is that the revised Article II is simply very verbose. Even though they eliminated the specific sources, it is longer than the current Article II.

In addition, the logic by which the revised Article II goes from point to point is not apparent.

(2) Watering down the principles. I would argue that although the Study Commission in its revised draft shoehorned in the principles, in the process they not only made the revision less clear and more verbose, they also watered down almost all of the current principles.

As just one example, the currently existing Article II says that "The member congregations...of the [UUA] covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person", which is a controversial and startling proposition about the moral equality of all human beings. Not everyone agrees with that statement!

The revision says that "we declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness". That is not at all the same thing -- it is saying that people MIGHT become worthy and obtain dignity, not that they are inherently so. And it is far less controversial, and far less likely to make one think.

Or, to take another example, the current Article II says that "The member congregations covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience..."

The proposed revision to Article II says that "the individual's right of conscience [is] central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage". This is a statement of historical fact. It seems to assume that there is no need for congregations to affirm and promote the right of conscience. It is a weaker statement.

I think one could go on and find a similar watering down in the case of the other principles. They are in there, but in weakened form.

3. Omitting specific sources. The listing of specific sources in the current Article II is important to many UUs, as it recognizes some of what they bring into UUism. The revision omits these specific sources.

Of these revisions, the omission of specific sources could be dealt with by an amendment that put them back in. But the other two objections -- the verbosity and lack of inspiration, and the watering down of the principles -- are really hard to deal with through amendments. To deal with these problems, you basically need to start over again with a fresh draft, which is hard to do via an amendment process.

As for arguments in favor of the revised Article II, here are the ones I have seen. I am sure there are others.

The arguments pro that I have seen include: (1) the values are easier to remember; (2) the revision promotes acting on our values and principles more than the current Article II; (3) there is a need to respect the process and enormous work of the Study Commission, rather than arbitrarily second-guessing it.

(1) Ease of memorizing values. Some have argued that it is easier to remember the 6 values -- interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity, built around the center of love -- than it is to remember the 7 principles, which are more than one word each.

I personally do not find the values any easier to remember than the principles. But more important, I find the 6 plus 1 values to be unchallenging truisms that are uncontroversial. Who disagrees with any of them? How do they in any way distinguish UUs from anyone else? In my view, we might as well say that we value motherhood and apple pie -- they simply are not challenging, or inspirational.

Now, it is true that these one-word "values" become more than truisms when one reads the multiple sentences describing each one. But that is part of the verbosity -- one simply cannot remember all this verbiage, or even remember the main THEME of this verbiage for each value.

So once one gets to the nitty-gritty content of the values, I really think it is hard to argue that they are easier to remember than the 7 principles.

(2) Some have argued that the proposed revision to Article II more aggressively promotes acting on our values/principles.

However, I personally do not see how this is so. A lot of the language about action in the revision is vague. And the current version of article II already has congregations covenanting to affirm and PROMOTE "justice, [and] equity..., the use of the democratic process...in our society at large..., world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." I think this is at least as "action-oriented" as anything in the revision.

(3) Need to honor the Article II Study Commission process. I have sometimes heard people say they do not want to second-guess the Commission, which had to try to listen to and incorporate a lot of input, much of which must have been contradictory.

I think the Study Commission had a difficult job -- no doubt about it. They chose to make their task more difficult by deciding to massively rewrite Article II rather than to tweak it.

But I think Article II is important enough that the General Assembly needs to make a judgment on the merits: is the proposed revised Article II better or worse than the current Article II? The Article II Study Commission is ultimately an advisory commission, not the final authority.

Is there a better alternative? Yes, I think there is. I have previously proposed a revised Article II that would try to make the 7 principles more memorable and poetic by deriving them from two central principles:

The inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

Our interdependence with each other in our local communities, and in the world, along with our interdependence with the natural world.

We could then, in my opinion, DERIVE the other 5 principles -- and, for that matter, a form of the 8th principle-- from these two central principles, which acknowledge both our individual worth, and our collective interdependence, which are in tension with each other, with no perfect solutions for reconciling the two.

For example, the "moral equality" implied by inherent worth and dignity, and our interconnectedness, justifies democracy and free and responsible inquiry. If we were radically unequal, why would we allow free and responsible inquiry-- better to defer to the superior ones who know better. And why have democracy if some are much better than others. And interconnectedness implies that worth and dignity are better realized if they are recognized via free expression and democracy.

One could then go on to add some of the phrases from the Commission's draft to Article II to make sure that Article II reflects today's understandings of UU values.

A draft of my proposal is available. I should state that it was written before the Commission released its final draft. However, I think the central point that I want to make is the following:

If we want Article II to be poetic, memorable, and inspirational. we cannot do this with 7 (or eight) principles, or 6 plus 1 values -- simply too many to be memorable, and hard to make that many poetic and inspirational. If you want to make Article II memorable, you have to pick 2 or 3 "central" principles or values, and try to derive the rest of the Article II principles or values from that.

Maybe you disagree with my particular choice of two central principles -- maybe you would pick two others --, but SOME sort of focus such as this is necessary.

The Study Commission to some extent tried to do this by saying the central theme is "Love", but "love" is too vague a word to bear so heavy a weight. And in fact the Commission does not derive the six values from Love in any real way.

In a recent column, , NY Times columnist Jamelle Bouie illustrates some of what I am talking about. Bouie, in the process of defending transgender rights, makes it clear that "dignity", "equality", the "democratic process", and "justice" for all groups are interlinked -- they can NOT

be separated out. We need to recognize that all of these are inter-connected.

<https://www.nytimes.com/.../trump-desantis-transgender...>

Bouie's column may be behind a paywall, but here are some quotes:

"Over the past year, we have seen a sweeping and ferocious attack on the rights and dignity of transgender people across the country....

Democracy....is not just a set of rules and institutions, but a way of life. In the democratic ideal, we meet one another in the public sphere as political and social equals, imbued with dignity and entitled to the same rights and privileges. "

"I have referred to dignity twice now. That is intentional....We don't talk much about dignity in American politics, despite the fact that the demands of many groups for dignity and respect in public life have been a driving force in American history since the beginning. ...One of the great theorists of dignity and democracy in the United States was....Frederick Douglass, whose experience in bondage gave him a lifelong preoccupation with the ways that dignity is either cultivated or denied."

"Douglass observed "that although dignity seems to be woven into human nature, it is also something one possesses to the degree that one is conscious of having it...., and one's own consciousness of having it depends in part on making others conscious of it. " "

End of quote from Bouie.

Bouie then goes on to point out that Douglass not only fought for dignity for Black Americans, but also fought for dignity for women, arguing that "women themselves are divested of a large measure of their natural dignity by their exclusion from....Government".

And Bouie then goes on to argue that

"The denial of dignity to one segment of the political community...threatens the dignity of all. This was true for Douglass and his time -- it inspired his support for women's suffrage and his opposition to the Chinese Exclusion Act -- and it is true for us and ours as well. To deny equal respect and dignity to any part of the citizenry is to place the entire country on the road to tiered citizenship and limited rights, to liberty for some and hierarchy for the rest."

"Put plainly, the attack on the dignity of transgender Americans is an attack on the dignity of all Americans. And like the battles for abortion rights and bodily autonomy, the stakes of the fight for the rights and dignity of transgender people are high for all of us. There is no world in which their freedom is suppressed and yours is sustained."

Back from Bouie:

The UUA can build towards justice in a tweaked Article II that does not water down our commitment to inherent worth and dignity, but rather spells out how our other values/principles can be derived from that commitment. THAT would be memorable -- and thereby poetic and inspirational.

Or to put it another way: Maybe we should ask a writer as skilled as Bouie to take our current efforts with respect to Article II, and to summarize them in shorter and more powerful language that builds from a central principle towards a larger vision.