

My Most Challenging Principle

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Commentary on an essay by Richard S. Gilbert on UUA Principle Two: *We affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations*. Printed in With Purpose and Principle by Edward S. Frost (ed.).

In opening, Reverend Gilbert offers us a bit of history for his discussion of Principle Two, including the focus on practical application of religious principles to daily life promoted by Faustus Socinus in the 16th century Minor Church of Poland; Ralph Emerson's emphasis on deed over creed in the 19th century; and the contemporary appeal by Eugene Pickett "...to create heaven on earth."

Rev. Gilbert follows up on this introduction with a discussion of several concepts associated with Principle Two:

The essay defines **compassion** as shared suffering, which leads to empathy and finally to action. He goes on to ask, "How can we presume to understand our society without deep feelings of *moral outrage* at the pervasiveness of suffering and injustice?"

As I discussed in an earlier talk, I think the development of social perspective taking leads to an expansion of empathy, which in turn engenders compassion. Compassion motivates an ego-free response, if any response is possible, toward the person for whom one feels compassion. I think that "moral outrage" is an emotionally motivated egotistic state that is incompatible with both empathy and compassion.

Personally, I don't pretend to understand our society, which is the reflection of very complex, dynamic and organic processes. I suspect that Rev. Gilbert doesn't understand it either. I think that he has certain beliefs about society through which he filters and construes his observations. While he doesn't elaborate on what those beliefs are, they are no doubt the source for his emotional state of "moral outrage."

The essay also offers us the position of David Williams that states, "We are joined together by a *mystic oneness* whose source we may never know, but whose reality we can never doubt...We are our neighbor's keeper, because that neighbor is but our larger self..."

David Williams seems to be offering us a vision of a transcendent self that is merged in the unity of All That Is, which is similar to the unified field of consciousness that I have mentioned in previous talks. I would suggest that Williams' perspective on caring for our neighbors grounded in the understanding that our neighbors and we are joined through the unity of transcendent consciousness is a firmer basis for compassionate action than "moral outrage." Thus, I find it hard to reconcile "moral outrage" with "mystic oneness" and personally would find true compassion to be more likely to arise from the latter than the former.

It seems to me that "moral outrage" must be against the alleged perpetrators of perceived injustice, which creates a dualism that is incompatible with the non-dualistic "mystic oneness" of David Williams. The "victim versus the perpetrator" struggle in Rev. Gilbert's dualistic conception merges into transcendent unity in Williams' non-dualistic conception. The former seeks victory of one over the other and the latter seeks reconciliation of differences. I would argue that the implications for actions arising from these two views are very different and makes this section of the essay a study in contradiction. Personally, compassion flowing from "mystic oneness" resonates better with me than "moral outrage."

The essay states that **equity** is not equality but fairness. Rev. Gilbert then asserts that equity is the measuring rod for *social justice* and that social justice demands that society improve the conditions of its impoverished and call into question the corruption of its affluent. He asks, "How does one allocate resources and by what criteria in a free society?"

I think it is important to understand the term "fair" since this is the core meaning of equity in Rev. Gilbert's definition of the term. According to the dictionary, the primary meaning of "fair" is "free of bias or dishonesty;" and the secondary meaning is "proper according to the rules." Of course rules can be or not be biased or dishonest so I'll focus on the primary meaning. Bias in a negative sense implies that a rule is constructed in such a way that it arbitrarily favors one person over another person.

For example, a law prohibiting someone from using a public water fountain because of their skin color is not fair or equitable because it is based on an arbitrary characteristic of the person. On the other hand, prohibiting someone from using a public water fountain because they have a communicable disease that can reasonably be expected to be transmitted through use of the water fountain would be fair and not an arbitrary bias. Thus, the issue is not bias per se but arbitrary bias or arbitrary discrimination. I would suggest that "dishonesty" is simply another way of saying "arbitrary bias."

We can conclude then that *justice* requires that the rules or laws in a community, state or nation should be equitable, that is, free of arbitrary bias. Indeed, one of the primary meanings of justice is the quality of being equitable and one of the secondary meanings is that of lawfulness; that is, justice requires laws free of arbitrary bias both in wording and in enforcement.

The notion of "social justice" is peculiar given the understanding of justice just arrived at. Justice could of necessity only be reflected within society either at the community, state or national level and is thereby inherently social. Thus, those who use the term obviously mean something different from the meaning of justice just discussed. The term social justice was initially used in 1840 by a Sicilian priest and was, a few years later, taken up by the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill. The initial use of the term was a call for virtuous behavior by parishioners in their personal dealings with others. Mill's use of the term implied that society should behave virtuously.

The idea that an abstract entity, "society," could take on virtue in the sense that an individual can be virtuous seems to me to be a case of fallaciously attributing human characteristics to an abstraction. Thus, what I take Rev. Gilbert to be suggesting is that some "agent" acting on behalf

of society should impose his or her notion of virtue on the aggregate of individuals comprising society. This was precisely what Benito Mussolini did in his national socialist state in fascist Italy, which he proudly proclaimed to be a totalitarian state. At the time, totalitarian meant that the agent acting for the state, for example Mussolini, imposed his notion of virtue on all aspects of society or the total. Interestingly, emulation of Mussolini and his totalitarian state was suggested to Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s as the way to overcome the economic depression. Fortunately, Roosevelt declined to fully embrace the idea.

Rev. Gilbert asked the question, "How does one allocate resources and by what criteria in a free society?" I think the answer is that you don't, because the question contains inherently contradictory elements. You can't have an agent (or agents) acting on his or her notion of virtuous behavior decide how to allocate resources and have a free society at the same time. They are mutually exclusive. Having a so-called virtuous society would require an agent that can impose decisions about what is correct and incorrect behavior on the total population. In short, a totalitarian order imposed by dictatorial powers.

The essay goes on to address **justice**, which I have already given considerable attention to earlier, separately from social justice. Justice according to Rev. Gilbert requires more than can be achieved by mere compassion. He states that justice requires a systemic approach that addresses underlying problems. A systemic approach he says must address government policy, taxation, welfare programs and income redistribution among others. It requires transcendent values or virtues that, according to Rev. Gilbert, cannot be determined by democratic processes or market forces. Thus, by implication he is arguing that a systemic approach must rely on values or virtues derived from and imposed by an authority.

It seems to me that it matters little who that authority is. It is a call for an authoritarian or totalitarian approach to governing society so that it might be recast in the image of an individual or group of individuals believed by some to be virtuous. Clearly, this goes well beyond the definition of justice derived earlier as requiring that the rules or laws in a community, state or nation should be equitable, that is, free of arbitrary bias. Personally, I can embrace a definition of justice based on "equitable law" as previously discussed but find Rev. Gilbert's notion of justice alien to my notions of equity and fairness.

The essay continues beyond the three basic elements of the second principle to talk about the **Beloved Community** and the **Prophetic Imperative**. Rev. Gilbert states that the concept of a beloved community best characterizes a liberal religious concern for justice, equity and compassion, which he finds to be in step with the UU tradition of attempting to build "heaven on earth." I am immediately reminded of a quote from the philosopher Karl Popper, "The attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell."

The reason I think that Popper draws this conclusion is that there has never been a successful utopian community over the long term. Such communities invariably fail because they ultimately require a totalitarian order formulated according to the beliefs of some authoritarian leader. Since no one is infallible, there is always a flaw in the vision of such "leaders" and ultimately "heaven" sinks back into the mundane world in which real and ordinary people live.

The prophetic imperative is, for Rev. Gilbert, the requirement that we all work to make the beloved community or heaven on earth a reality. He argues that we should attempt to repair the world, for in doing so we will repair ourselves. I'm not sure what prophecy his prophetic imperative is grounded in, but whatever it is, I am certain that it is flawed as have been all such idealistic notions.

The need to repair something implies that at one time it was in good working order. What specifically does this repair intend to restore and when and where did it exist? I believe life is too "messy" for it to ever exhibit perfection. Can a community, state, nation or indeed the world be improved? I believe it can through a spiritual practice. I also believe that it can only be done by starting with oneself, not some abstraction such as society.

In an earlier talk I offered some thoughts on employing a personal ideal or standard to guide one's own behavior in interacting with others. Setting and following a personal ideal is a spiritual practice in its most basic sense and probably the best way to "repair" oneself. The primary way in which a personal ideal needs to be expressed is through interaction with others within the context of family, work and associations. It is in these very personal and daily relationships where you have the most power to affect the world. It is the cumulative effect of this type of action that changes the world. Change is a bottom-up process that begins with oneself, not with an abstraction. This I think was the intent behind the original use, by the Sicilian priest, of the term "social justice."