

Judgment in the Proposed Article II and the UUA



The Last Judgement, by Jean Cousin (ca. 1522–1595)

Opinion

by Barbara L. Barnes

The term “judgment” means different things to different people and in different contexts. The definitions in multiple dictionaries range from opinion to legal pronouncement with consequences. In Christian circles, judgment often alludes to the “Last Judgment.” This construct purports that, come the end of time, God will review all lives, with those people found lacking condemned to Hell.

This religious use of “judgment” directly opposes our Unitarian and Universalist roots. As Lincoln Baxter states in his essay “Article II Comparison with Detailed Commentary”¹ page 10, Unitarians “rejected predestination and adopted the concept of salvation through character ... (and Universalists) rejected ‘original sin’ and proclaimed that God wouldn’t damn anyone to Hell forever.” Essentially, non-judgment, acceptance, or at least tolerance and compassion are bedrock for Unitarian Universalism (UU). The concepts explain UUs championing diversity and dissent. UUs have promoted debate as a route to individual truth.

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Non-Judgmental

However, is non-judgment true in UU practice today? Is judgment creeping into our religion, at both national and local levels?

Judgment resides in the currently proposed Article II changes² to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) bylaws and the current UUA five-year plans.³ The proposed Article II up for vote at General Assembly 2023 superficially appears noble and aspirational. I agree with the proposed Article II's general concepts of love, opposing racism and all forms of oppression, and multi-cultural inclusion.

Covenant and Accountability

However, both the proposed Article II and UUA five-year plans repetitively connect covenants/commitments with accountable/accountability. Joining the concepts has led to selectively publicized situations of the UUA expelling UU ministers⁴ and congregations ejecting members⁵ for being out-of-covenant when expressing personal beliefs.

Enforced accountability arises on page 13 in the five-year plan report by UUA staff entitled "Widening the Circle of Concern, 2022 Implementation Plan," (cited above.) It states, "Accountability Launch Group – The UUA Board is preparing with key UU identity groups and stakeholders to launch an ongoing, iterative accountability group to help ensure the UUA follows through in its long-term AR/AO/MC commitments." (AR/AO/MC means anti-racism/anti-oppression/multi-culturalism.) The cited commitments are unexplained.

A follow-up bullet point in the document states, "Develop practices and frameworks for reparations within the UUA." This statement, meaning codifying proper amends for judged wrong acts, reaches beyond just the organization. It applies to UU congregations and members, since the proposed Article II covenants address the organization, congregations, and individuals. The UUA plans also address embedded accountable action including "... audit(ing) for oppressive practices at the congregational level."⁶

In the proposed Article II, why covenant repetitively? In the current Article II Seven Principles⁷ we merely promise once to "affirm and promote" the outlined concepts with "mutual trust and support." UUs often tease that we don't have Ten Commandments we have Seven Suggestions. I

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consider this no frivolous joke. The proposed Article II replaces the “suggestions” with six specific action-statement covenants. I fled a religion that enshrined a code of thought, eliminating differing opinions. Allowing me to choose my own beliefs, rather than submit to enforced regulations, attracted me to UU.

Why Dictate Accountability

Why dictate accountable actions? Inciting action often uses either a carrot or a stick. I believe that a religion should inspire adherents rather than compel with threats. The current Six Sources in Article II⁸ list inspirational resources. People opposed to the proposed Section C-2.3 Inspirations⁹ (replacing the Six Sources with vague allusions rather than a never-complete list) state that the new language doesn’t inspire. With no motivational “carrot,” the alternative of an accountability “stick” appears. Many religions have used disciplinary methods to assure adherence to their authority and philosophies. The Inquisition provides an extreme example.

Accountable covenant language in the proposed Article II Section C-2.2. Values and Covenants¹⁰ comes uncomfortably close to credal language, often used in accountability tests.

People argue that the proposed Article II is not a creed, because the covenants concern values, not theological beliefs. Perhaps better terminology suggests that the proposed Article II requires pledging “correct” reactions to a perceived set of “correct” values/beliefs. Credal or “correct” allegiance, either assessment presses external judgment on my personal beliefs.

A counterargument to my viewpoint might claim, “But, UU centers on Love!” As stated earlier, I agree with the proposed Article II’s general principles of love, opposing racism and oppression, and multi-culturalism. However, in my opinion, a cornerstone of love is not accountable covenant judgment. Accountability produces judgment using conditional love – love when you believe/act as I do. Judgment, embodied in accountable covenants, codified in the proposed Article II and UUA plans, is not aligned with the bedrock UU value of loving acceptance/tolerance. According to the definition by Karen Armstrong, acclaimed religion scholar, accountable covenants fail the compassion test of a valid religious idea.¹¹

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Heirloom Newsletter

Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church

Cincinnati, Ohio

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¹ “Detailed Analysis,” Save the Seven Principles, savethe7principles.wordpress.com/analysis-commentary/

² “Article II Study Report 2021-2023,” prepared by the Article II Study Commission, Unitarian Universalist Association, uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf, report pages 19-22 (PDF pages 21-24).

³ “Widening the Circle of Concern: 2022 UUA Implementation Plan,” submitted by UUA Staff, Unitarian Universalist Association, uua.org/files/2022-07/WCC_2022_implementation_plan.pdf

⁴ In “UUA Clergy Removed or Resigned from Fellowship with Completed or Pending Misconduct Investigations,” Unitarian Universalist Association, uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/mfc/clergy-misconduct-investigations, see the last two defellowships and two resignations, citing bullying and abuse. See “The UUMA Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry,” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, uuma.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/uumaguidelines2021.pdf (no longer a valid URL page/ Mar 2024), page 5 point 8 and the definition of bullying and emotional abuse, page 39. See also *Used to be UU: The Systematic Attack on UU Liberalism*, by Casper & Kiskel, chapter 8, The Demolition of the Fourth Principle, The Real Meaning of Covenant and Accountability, re Rev. Eklof pages 147 – 151, and chapter 13, Accusation and Polarization II, The Suspension of Rev. Kate Rohde, pages 229-231. See also “UUMA Board to Ministers: Shut Up!” by Rev. Richard Trudeau, Truly Open Minds and Hearts, <https://trulyopenmindsandhearts.blog/2019/12/21/uuma-board-to-ministers-shut-up/>

⁵ I know personally of two ejected congregation members, privacy maintained. For additional expelled members see “The Dark Side of Dismantling,” Fifth Principle Project, fifthprincipleproject.org/2022/10/04/the-dark-side-of-dismantling/

⁶ In “Accountability and Resources,” part of Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the Commission on Institutional Change, Unitarian Universalist Association, uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/accountability-resources, see Recommendations and Take-Aways that discuss embedded accountability. See also *Used to be UU: The Systematic Attack on UU Liberalism*, Casper & Kiskel, The Expansion of Accountability, pages 158-163.

⁷ “The Seven Principles,” Unitarian Universalist Association, uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles

⁸ “Sources of Our Living Tradition,” Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

⁹ “Article II Study Report,” Unitarian Universalist Association, report pages 21-22 (PDF pages 23-24). <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>,

¹⁰ “Article II Study Report,” Unitarian Universalist Association, report pages 19-21 (PDF

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pages 21-24). <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>

¹¹ “The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice was that it must lead directly to practical compassion. If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, or self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God’s name, it was bad theology. Compassion was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, for the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, for Paul, and for Muhammad, not to mention Confucius, Lao-tsu, the Buddha, or the sages of the Upanishads.” Karen Armstrong. As found in LibQuotes. tinyurl.com/Armstrong-Quote