Religious Exploration Ministry

Handbook for Teachers and Advisors

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

Unitarianism and Universalism are two faiths that emerged in the United States in the 18th century. Their theological roots are much older. Unitarian Universalists are, as one bumper sticker says, "Different People, Different Beliefs, One Faith." **It is important that young people understand that although we hold different ideas about God or what is holy, we do not "believe anything we want." We share ethical and moral values, and a commitment to try to live them in our families, communities, and world.** One expression of shared values is the seven Principles covenanted by the congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Unitarian Universalists also believe:

- "Deeds not creeds." What we do in love is more important than what beliefs we hold.
- This life matters. Whatever happens after death, this life is the one we know now, the one we are responsible for.
- We expect our religious beliefs and understandings to change throughout our lives; we look to our faith communities to support our evolving faith.
- Religions are cultural creations of the societies in which they develop. While all religions address the same, basic human need for making meaning of life, they offer different answers, and those differences matter.

HISTORY

In the three hundred or so years after Jesus lived and died, Christianity changed from a form of Judaism into a separate faith. People who lived in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea held many different ideas about the nature of Jesus, God, and humanity. We now recognize some of those ideas as early versions of Unitarianism and Universalism. Origen of Alexandria in Egypt, who is responsible for much of the Christian scripture, wrote in the third century that God loves everyone and all return to God after death, an early universalist position. In the fourth century, Arius, also of Alexandria, preached that God is one and Jesus was a holy man, an early Unitarian position.

Debates among Christians were fierce, and sometimes violent. In 325 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine brought church leaders together at Nicea, in Turkey, where they agreed on a single creed, or set of beliefs, to unify the empire. The Nicene Creed held that God was a trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both unitarianism and universalism were declared heresies, punishable by excommunication and even death.

The heresies that are at the root of our contemporary Unitarian Universalism did not go away, but they did go underground for many centuries. In 1568, King John Sigismund of Transylvania became a Unitarian and made religious tolerance the law in his land. Unitarianism continues to thrive in this region today. Unitarian ideas cropped up in a number of places in Europe after the Protestant Reformation.

In the British colonies in America (later the United States) unitarian and universalist ideas about God and humanity developed and spread during the eighteenth century. Unitarian ideas developed within other Protestant congregations, as ministers and lay people turned away from the Calvinist notion that humans are depraved and dependent upon God for salvation to embrace the idea that the way we behave on earth determines whether we go to heaven or hell. These liberal thinkers were called "Unitarian," which was intended to be insulting.

In 1819, William Ellery Channing embraced the label "Unitarian" in a famous sermon. Between 1825 and 1835, many New England congregations split, often with the Trinitarians withdrawing to start new congregations and leaving the buildings to the Unitarians. Within a decade, the Transcendentalists, a new group that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, criticized the Unitarian churches for being too "cold" and too orthodox. The Transcendentalists preferred a spirituality that nurtured a connection with the natural world.

Universalist ideas were also a rejection of Calvinism, but universalism developed outside of established congregations. Missionaries spread the universalist message. Christian churches sprang up with the message that God's love is for everyone, no exceptions. Universalists rejected the idea that God would condemn some people to hell.

George de Benneville and John Murray were early Universalists, both coming to America from Europe in the 1700s. De Benneville spread the Universalist faith in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, while Murray preached primarily in New England. In 1805, itinerant preacher Hosea Ballou published A Treatise on Atonement, which explained Universalist ideas. The faith grew rapidly, especially where people's lives were difficult. Its news was joyful and hopeful, offering God's unconditional love to everyone.

In the 19th century, Unitarians and Universalists created structures to organize their respective denominations. Their statements of faith or belief emphasized different purposes and beliefs, and the two groups saw themselves as quite different from one another. But they shared important values, which made it possible for them to merge several generations later. Both Unitarians and Universalists believed in the freedom to think for oneself and valued individual conscience over a shared creed. Many ministers from both groups embraced Darwin's theory of evolution after it was published in 1860 and moved away from believing the Bible to be literally true in every word. Many Unitarians and Universalists believed in creating the Kingdom of God on earth, working to provide help for poor people, immigrants, mentally ill people, and others on the margins, as well as working tirelessly for the abolition of slavery, and then for women's suffrage. In both religions, women were especially active in providing help and working for a better society; Universalism was the first Christian faith in the U.S. to ordain women as ministers. By 1933, many Unitarians and Universalists had embraced the idea of humanism. They signed the Humanist Manifesto, which said that human beings, and not God, have the responsibility and the challenge to make the world a better place. Unitarian congregations in particular became home to both liberal Christians and those who called themselves religious humanists. Universalism remained largely a liberal Christian movement in the first half of the 20th century.

But something was stirring in the children's programs in both denominations. New discoveries in progressive education and an embrace of the teachings of science and reason alongside traditional Christian teachings led to a new way of teaching children. Angus MacLean, a Universalist, advocated for active, hands-on learning about the world in religious education classes. Sophia Lyon Fahs, a Unitarian, oversaw the development of new Sunday school materials that embraced stories from all over the world as well as understandings from science. Universalists began using the Unitarian materials in their religious education classrooms, and a generation of Unitarians and Universalists grew up learning about their faith the same way and hearing the same stories. By the late 1950s, the two denominations began to talk about merger. In 1961, the Unitarian Universalist Association was born from a consolidation of the two. Over the next few years, the Principles and Sources were adopted. By the late 1980s, the flaming chalice, originally the symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee, came into wide use in our congregations as a symbol of our faith. In 2011, the Unitarian Universalist Association celebrated the 50th anniversary of consolidation by remembering the deep and long heritage from both of its parent traditions and by reflecting on the shared journey of its first fifty years.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM FACT SHEET

Founded/Created: Two Christian denominations with religious traditions dating back 2,000 years to early Christianity consolidated in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In the United States, Unitarian thought arose within established churches in the late 1700s; the American Unitarian Association founded in 1825. Universalist thought arose in opposition to Calvinism in the 1700s; a regional group (the New England convention) organized and adopted a profession of beliefs in 1803.

Adherents: 800,000 worldwide

Sources of Religious Authority: There are six named Sources of religious authority: personal experience; words and deeds of prophetic people; wisdom from the world's religions; teachings from Jewish and Christian scripture; reason and the teachings of science; the natural world.

Prophets: Many Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have contributed their prophetic voices to the shaping of their faith tradition and to issues facing the broader community and world.

Symbol: Flaming chalice

Terms and Fundamental Precepts

Human beings: Every human being has worth and dignity. All people are deserving of love and compassion.

God: Unitarian Universalists have many different ideas about God. Some believe in God and others do not. Some use words like Nature, Love, Humanity, or Spirit of Life to name a force greater than themselves.

Truth: Truth is revealed in many different ways and there is always more truth to be found. Every person is responsible for seeking truth and meaning in life and for tending to their own spiritual journey.

Community: We are all connected to one another. Unitarian Universalists strive to build beloved communities of peace and justice in congregations and in the world.

Nature: We are part of the natural world. Our actions and choices should support the well being of all life that shares the interdependent web of life on earth.

Action: Actions matter far more than belief. As Unitarian Thomas Jefferson said, "... it is in our lives and not from our words that our religion must be judged."

FAMOUS UNITARIANS, UNIVERSALISTS, AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

James Luther Adams, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Margot Adler, Amos Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Horatio Alger, Jr., Steve Allen, Susan B. Anthony, Arius (256-336 CE), Roger Nash Baldwin, Adin Ballou, Hosea Ballou, P.T. Barnum, Bela Bartok, Clara Barton, Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Bergh, Tim Berners-Lee, Ray Bradbury, Andre Braugher, Antoinette Brown (Blackwell), Olympia Brown, Diahann Carroll, Alice Cary, Phoebe Cary, William Ellery Channing, Lydia Maria Child, e e cummings, Nathaniel Currier, Charles Darwin, George de Benneville, Charles Dickens, Dorothea Dix, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sophia Fahs, Fannie Farmer, Millard Fillmore, Robert Fulghum, Buckminster Fuller, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Gaskell, Horace Greeley, Edvard Grieg, Nina Grieg, Henry Hampton, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Hoar, Edith Holden, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Starr King, Lewis Howard Latimer, Viola Liuzzo, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Horace Mann, Herman Melville, Maria Mitchell, Samuel F. B. Morse, John Murray, Isaac Newton, Florence Nightingale, Keith Olbermann, Theodore Parker, Linus Pauling, Beatrix Potter, Joseph Priestley, Christopher Reeve, Paul Revere, Malvina Reynolds, Ram Mohun Roy, Benjamin Rush, Albert Schweitzer, Pete Seeger, Michael Servetus, Rod Serling, Adlai Stevenson II, Lucy Stone, Emily Stowe, William Howard Taft, Henry David Thoreau, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Mary Augusta Ward, Josiah Wedgwood, Mary Wollstonecraft, Frank Lloyd Wright, N.C. Wyeth, Whitney M. Young, Jr.

SOURCES OF OUR FAITH

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

1. Direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life

2. Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love

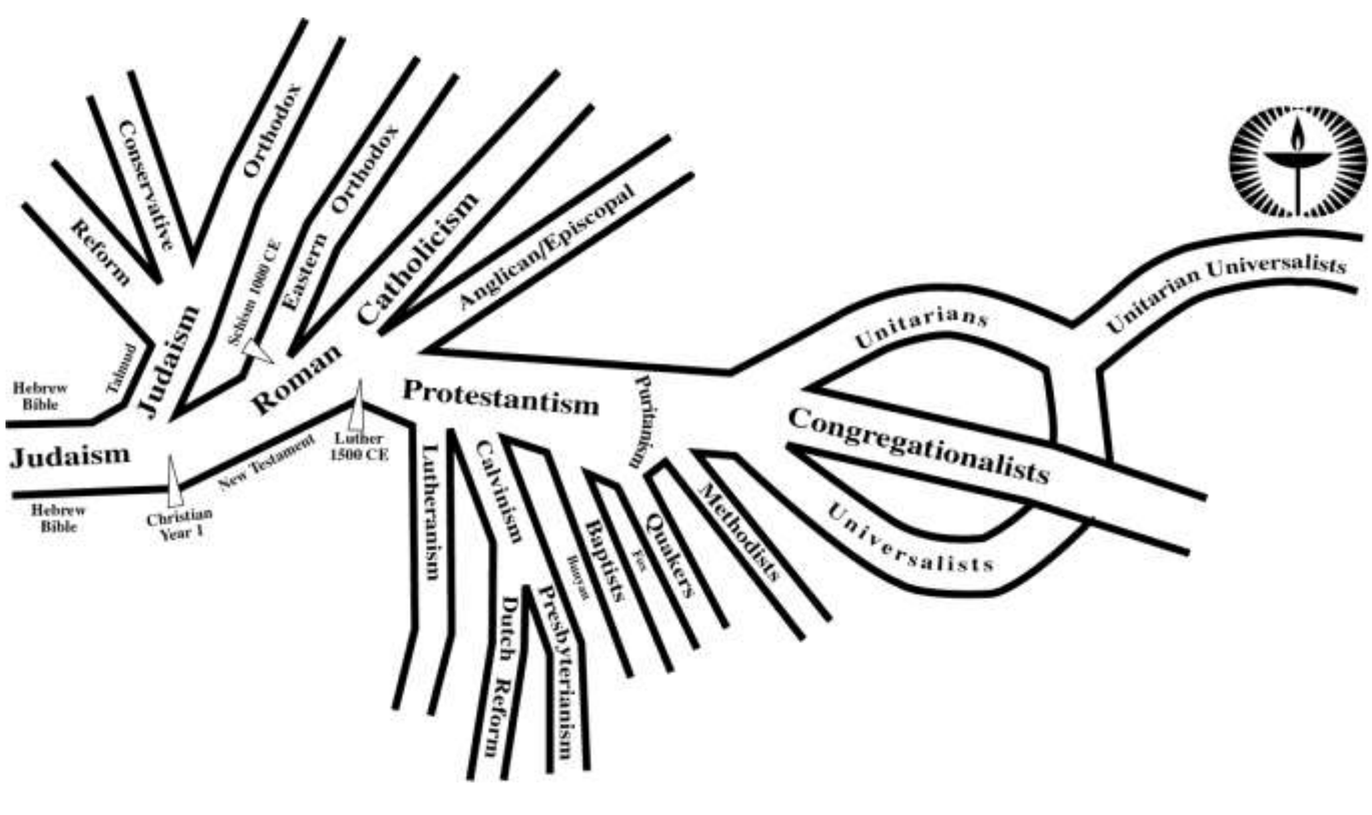
3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life

4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves

5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit

6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

SOURCE RELIGIONS OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM



FIND OUT MORE: Unitarian Universalism — History and Beliefs

Find extensive resources on the Unitarian Universalist Association website (at www.uua.org/), including:

- " Our Unitarian Universalist Faith: Frequently Asked Questions' (at www.uua.org/publications/pamphlets/introductions/151250.shtml)," by the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley
- "Unitarian Universalist Views of the Bible" (at www.uua.org/publications/pamphlets/ theologicalperspectives/151245.shtml)," edited by the Rev. Tom Goldsmith.
- "Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith (at www.uua.org/publications/pamphlets/introductions/151249.shtml)" (pamphlet)
- "Flaming chalice: Symbol of Our Faith (at www.uua.org/beliefs/6901.shtml)" (article)
- UU Perspectives (at www.uua.org/beliefs/uuperspectives/index.shtml) (links to topical web pages on the UUA website)
- In the Tapestry of Faith adult curriculum, The New UU:
    - Common Views Among Unitarian Universalists (at www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/thenew/workshop1/workshopplan/leaderresources/160230.shtml) (Workshop 1, Leader Resource)
    - Themes in North American Unitarian Universalist History (at www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/thenew/workshop2/workshopplan/stories/160263.shtml) (Workshop 2, Story)
    - Cathedral of the World (at www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/thenew/workshop1/workshopplan/stories/160219.shtml) (Workshop 1, Story), an excerpt from *Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (at www.uuabookstore.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=1297) by Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
- The Tapestry of Faith youth curriculum A Place of Wholeness (at www.uua.org/tapestryoffaith/aplace) guides UU youth to examine their faith journeys in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

Books include *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago: Meadville-Lombard Press, 2001); find many more titles in the "history" section (at www.uuabookstore.org/showproducts.cfm?FullCat=31) of the online UUA Bookstore.

Another source for Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history is the Religious Tolerance (at www.religioustolerance.org/u-u1.htm) website.

A mid-19th-century article, "Brief History of Universalism" by Rev. J.M. Austin, appears in full on the website of Auburn University (at www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/briefhist.html). "Our Unitarian Universalist Faith: Frequently Asked Questions (at www.uua.org/publications/pamphlets/introductions/151250.shtml)," by the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, "Our Unitarian Universalist Faith: Frequently Asked Questions (at www.uua.org/publications/pamphlets/introductions/151250.shtml)," talks about the texts from which Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration.