



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 10 Number 44
November 25, 2015

Unitarian Universalists
Who Are They and What Do They Believe (Or Not)?

By Tal Davis

One religious movement that once had a prominent place in American history is that of Unitarianism. Unitarianism was once a deeply entrenched religious group in certain parts of the United States, particularly the Northeast. Today, only a remnant of early American Unitarianism still exists in the church organization officially called the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). In 2014, that coalition of affiliated churches claimed 158,186 members in 1047 local congregations (down from 164,684 in 2009).

In this article we will analyze the history and theology of the modern UUA and suggest several ways Christians can reach out to those involved in this non-Christian faith. First, here is some significant information:

Headquarters:

(USA): 24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210-1409
(617) 742-2100
website: www.uua.org

(Canada) Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC)
400-215 Spadina Ave.
Toronto, ON M5T 2C7
Phone: 416-489-4121
Toll Free: 1-888-568-5723
website: www.cuc.ca

Ministries and Organizations of UUA:

* Religious Education Action Clearing House (REACH)

- * Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPS)
- * Unitarian Universalist Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Ministries (UU LGBTQ Ministries)
- * Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
- * Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society (UUWHS)
- * Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU)

Publishers and Publications:

- * Beacon Press
- * Skinner House Books
- * UU World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association (www.uuworld.org)
- * Synapse (YRUU)
- * www.uuabookstore.org

Brief History of Unitarian Universalism

The concept of God as a single unitary being – as an alternative to traditional Christian Trinitarianism – can be traced in ancient times to the teachings of Arius (A.D. 256-336), a pastor in Alexandria, Egypt, who taught that the Son was a created being and not equal to the Father. Arius, and his movement called Arianism, argued that the Bible does not teach a Trinitarian concept of God and that Jesus made no claims to deity. His Unitarian view was rejected as heretical by the Council of Nicea in 325.

The Unitarian view remained dormant in church history until after the Protestant Reformation when Michael Servetus (1511-1553) in Spain, and Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) in Poland, questioned anew the historic Trinitarian doctrine. Later, a Hungarian named Frances David (1510-1579) led a movement that was the

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first to be labeled Unitarian. In England, Unitarianism raised its head in the teachings of John Biddle (1615-1662), who attempted to disprove the Trinity from the Bible.

In the United States, the first church to adopt Unitarian doctrine officially was King's Chapel in Boston, MA. In 1786, that congregation left its Episcopal roots to embrace the Unitarian view. Soon afterward, Harvard University followed suit.

The American Unitarian Association (AUA) was formally established in 1825. It was led by William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), pastor of Federal Street Congregational Church in Boston. Channing, as did most Unitarian ministers of the time, despite their rejection of Trinitarianism, still relied on the Bible for their theological formulations.

Unitarians claim that a number of prominent eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans embraced Unitarian, or deist, beliefs. They include five presidents of the United States: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft. Other famous Americans claimed by Unitarians include Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Susan B. Anthony.

In the 20th century Unitarianism abandoned any claim to biblical authority. In fact, in the years from 1918 to 1937, the movement internally debated the very existence of God. Eventually, it fell under the domination of naturalism and humanism. This culminated in 1933 with the publishing of the starkly naturalistic Humanist Manifesto. One-half of its signees were Unitarian ministers.

Some prominent Americans in the 20th century who were claimed by the Unitarian Universalist Associa-

tion (UUA) included statesman Adlai Stevenson, US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., writer Robert Fulghum, actors Paul Newman and Christopher Reeve, poet Carl Sandburg, and TV writer and producer Rod Serling.

In 1961, the Unitarian churches merged with a small movement called the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). In the decades since, the UUA has developed into a society of local congregations that focus primarily on liberal social, political, environmental, and gender-related issues. One surprising trend is the increasing growth of neo-paganism and witchcraft in some UUA congregations. The influence of secular humanism, while still strong, has diminished somewhat with the rise of postmodernism.

Beliefs of the UUA

1. Complete religious freedom for each individual

"Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion born of the Jewish and Christian traditions. We keep our minds open to the religious questions people have struggled with in all times and places.

We believe that personal experience, conscience, and reason should be the final authorities in religion. In the end religious authority lies not in a book, person, or institution, but in ourselves. We put religious insights to the test of our hearts and minds.

We uphold the free search for truth. We will not be bound by a statement of belief. We do not ask anyone to subscribe to a creed. We say ours is a noncreedal religion. Ours is a free faith.

We believe that religious wisdom is ever changing. Human understanding of life and death, the world and its mysteries, is never final. Revelation is continuous. We celebrate unfolding truths known to teachers, prophets, and sages throughout the ages.

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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We affirm the worth of all women and men. We believe people should be encouraged to think for themselves. We know people differ in their opinions and lifestyles, and we believe these differences generally should be honored.

We seek to act as a moral force in the world, believing that ethical living is the supreme witness of religion. The here and now and the effects our actions will have on future generations deeply concern us. We know that our relationships with one another, with diverse peoples, races, and nations, should be governed by justice, equity, and compassion."

(Marta Flanagan, *We Are Unitarian Universalists*. UUA, 1995 - (booklet available free online at: <http://www.uuabookstore.org/Assets/PDFs/3081.pdf>)

Biblical Response

Christians also affirm the right of free, moral individuals to decide their religious beliefs for themselves. No person should ever be coerced to profess a religion's tenets that they do not actually believe.

Nonetheless, Christians also affirm the rights of local and national religious organizations to prescribe doctrinal and behavior standards for membership. Nearly all historic Christian organizations require adherence to essential biblical teachings on the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation. Evangelical churches generally require testimony of an experience of acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior and Lord (see Rom. 10:9-10).

2. Reason Is the Guide to Truth

In the last century, most Unitarian Universalists maintained that human reason, intuition, and scientific research were the only reliable sources for discovering all truth. Generally, they rejected supernatural sources of

knowledge – especially divine sources of revelation such as the Bible or other religious texts.

Nonetheless, in recent decades, many neo-pagan Unitarian Universalists have accepted supernatural beliefs that defy naturalistic presuppositions.

"One might say that life is our scripture. While Unitarianism and Universalism both have roots in the Protestant Christian tradition, where the Bible is the sacred text, we now look to additional sources for religious and moral inspiration. Over two centuries, our religious tradition, a "living tradition," has branched out from its roots. We celebrate the spiritual insights of the world's religions, recognizing wisdom in many scriptures.

When we read scripture in worship, whether it is the Bible, the Dhammapada, or the Tao Te-Ching, we interpret it as a product of its time and its place. There is wisdom there, and there are inspiring stories, but scripture is not to be interpreted narrowly or oppressively. It can be beautiful, inspirational and wise. But in our tradition, scripture is never the only word, or the final word.

From the beginning we have trusted in the human capacity to use reason and draw conclusions about religion. Influenced by experience, culture, and community, each of us ultimately chooses what is sacred to us." (<http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sacred-texts>)

Biblical Response

Christians affirm that human reason, intuition, and scientific research have some limited value for discovering truth about the natural world or spiritual reality. However, they maintain that neither human reason, nor intuition, nor science are capable of discerning all truth – especially that

regarding spiritual reality. That must come from special divinely inspired revelation (see Rom. 1:18-20).

Christians, therefore, believe that God has revealed truth about His own nature, the creation, and redemption, only in the Bible and in the Person of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

3. No particular belief about God is taught

"What the Unitarian Universalist fellowship offers me is the encouragement to be utterly my most responsible self in matters of theological belief. When I use the word God or God/ess, it is with the full understanding that I speak from personal conviction and experience, and not from any desire to impose my 'revelation' on others." (Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age*)

Unitarian Universalists do not have any stated doctrinal belief concerning the existence or nature of a god. It is entirely the prerogative of each individual to determine what, if any, concept of deity they wish to accept. Historically, Unitarians rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity as polytheistic. Currently, however, some Unitarian Universalists profess belief in gods and goddesses of various numbers and kinds. Some simply refer to a vague notion of a "Higher Power."

Biblical Response

The Bible teaches that there is only one infinite and eternal God. He is the creator of all that exists in the universe. The Bible teaches that this One God exists eternally as three separate persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 8:6, 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22, 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2).

Christians maintain that this concept of God is absolutely true and that any other concept is false. Belief in and worship of any other god or gods is considered idolatry and is unacceptable in Christian churches and fellowships (see Ex. 20:1-6; Deut. 5:6-8, 6:4).

4. Jesus Christ was a great religious teacher (but not necessarily unique)

"But whatever we [Unitarian Universalists] call ourselves, (Christian, Jew, theist, agnostic, humanist, atheist), most of us would agree that the important thing about Jesus is not his supposed miraculous birth or the claim that he was resurrected from death, but rather how he lived . . . The Apostles Creed and other such statements of dogmatic theology entirely miss this point." (John Buehrens and Forrest

Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Beacon Press, 1998.)

Unitarian Universalists who believe that Jesus actually lived (and many do not) regard Him to be merely a moral teacher or religious reformer. They generally reject any notion that He was a divinely inspired leader, and especially reject the claim that He was the unique incarnation of God.

Biblical Response

The Bible affirms that Jesus not only was a genuine, historical figure who led a moral or religious movement, but was also the unique incarnation of God. Thus, He was fully deity and claimed equality with God (see John 1:1,14, 5:17-18, 23, 8:56-59, 10:30-33; Col. 1:15-20, 2:9).

Jesus lived a sinless life and performed numerous miraculous acts that are reported in the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Ultimately, He prophesied His own death and physical resurrection (see John 2:18-22), and appeared physically to more than 500 of His disciples (see Luke 24:36-43; 1 Cor. 15:1-8).

5. Mankind Is Basically Good

Unitarian Universalists reject the biblical doctrine of original sin. They teach that all people are basically good and have no need for spiritual redemption from the effects of sin.

"Doctrinally, Universalism's principle theological contribution lies in striking hell from the theological sense. Complementing this, Unitarianism (in addition to affirming God's oneness) removed original sin. Together they conspire brilliantly on behalf of goodness." (Buehrens and Church, *A Chosen Faith*)

Biblical Response

The Bible teaches that mankind – descended from Adam and Eve – is, by nature, sinful. Thus, people are incapable of enjoying a relationship with a holy God and are in need of full redemption. No acts of righteousness or good works can restore a sinful person to a right relationship with God. Neither can a person, by his own efforts, overcome the effects of sin, either in this life or for eternity (see Rom. 3:23, 7:14-25; 1 John 1:8-10).

6. Salvation Is Finding One's Own Self-fulfillment and Truth

Unitarian Universalists, as indicated, do not subscribe to any formal doctrinal perspective. Also, as

indicated, they have not stated a position on the nature (or existence) of God. In addition, they have no concept of original sin, and, in fact, reject the notion of mankind's sinfulness and affirm the basic goodness of humanity. As a result, Unitarian Universalists see no essential need for the traditional concepts of Christian redemption and salvation. Since men are not sinners, they do not need forgiveness from sin.

For them, salvation – for lack of a better word – is simply an individual's achievement of self-actualization. In this view, whatever way one is able to find meaning or purpose for life is valid.

"For us, salvation is not an otherworldly journey, flown on wings of dogma. It is ethical striving and moral growth: respect for the personalities and experiences of others; faith in human dignity and potentiality; aversion to sanctimony and bigotry; reverence for the gift of life; confidence in a true harmony of mind and spirit, of nature and human nature; faith in the ability to give and receive love; and a quest for broad, encompassing religious expression – spiritual yet practical, personal and communal." (Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist*. Skinner House Books; 2nd edition, 2005)

Biblical Response

Christians believe that since sin exists and mankind by nature is sinful, all people need personal salvation from its effects. It is through the sacrificial atonement of Christ by His death on the cross and the bodily resurrection, that redemption was made available to all people (see 1 Cor. 15:1-8). They believe salvation is accessed "by grace through faith" in Jesus Christ alone (see Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

7. Life after Death Is an Open Question - Heaven and Hell Are States of Mind

Most modern Unitarian Universalists do not concern themselves to a great extent over issues of life-after-death. Those who do believe in some concept of existence after this life describe it in vague terms. Many Unitarian Universalists simply state that heaven and hell are only states of mind in this life – that may or may not extend beyond death. Some neopagans in the UUA probably have adopted Eastern or New Age concepts of reincarnation or spiritualism.

Nearly all Unitarian Universalists reject any concept of an eternal hell for punishment of sin. In fact, one UUA writer praised the Universalists historic rejection of the traditional Christian view. He wrote, "The creedal assumptions formulated at Nicaea must be in

error. Even though the Nicaean Council had pointed out that God's justice required the punishment of sin, it was self-evident that a good and perfect God created humans to grow eternally in the goodness of their creator." (Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age*)

Biblical Response

The Bible clearly affirms that all people live on after death (see 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23-24; Rev. 6:9-10, 14:13). It indicates that those who received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord will abide in heaven for eternity (see John 3:16, 14:3).

The doctrine of eternal hell was taught by Jesus and affirmed in the Bible. He taught that the righteous will have eternal life, but the wicked will suffer eternal punishment (see Matt. 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thes. 1:9; Rev. 20-22).

Witnessing to UUAs

1. Be sure of your own faith and the Bible. Christians need to understand the basic tenets of the Christian faith and why the Bible is reliable.

2. Inquire about the Unitarian Universalist's personal beliefs. Since the UUA has no standard doctrinal beliefs, members vary widely in their personal convictions. Ask questions like, "According to your understanding, what is God like?" or "Who is Jesus Christ, in your opinion?"

3. Focus on the essential issues of the Christian faith: God, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and salvation. Do not get sidetracked discussing denominational differences or other non-essential issues.

4. Do not argue. Ask questions about her beliefs and listen to her answers. Give reasonable answers to her questions or objections about your faith in Christ.

5. Share your personal testimony of faith in Christ. The Unitarian Universalist may have many intellectual objections, but she cannot argue with your experience.

6. Share the plan of salvation. Remember, many in the UUA have a distorted view of Christianity, and she may never have even heard the simple plan of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

7. Invite your Unitarian Universalist friend to read Christian literature that you will provide for her. Some excellent authors and books that will challenge her intellectually to consider Christianity are listed below.

Charles Colson - Burden of Truth: Answers to Your Kid's Questions
Winfried Corduan - Reasonable Faith: Basic Christian Apologetics
William Lane Craig - Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics
Norman Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks - When Skeptics Ask: Basic Christian Apologetics
C.S. Lewis - Mere Christianity
Paul Little - Know Why You Believe
Josh McDowell - More Than A Carpenter; The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict
John Newport - Life's Ultimate Questions
Francis A. Schaeffer - The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer
Lee Strobel - The Case for Christ; The Case for Faith
Ravi Zacharias - Can Man Live Without God?

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