

Themes in North American Unitarian Universalist History

Though it has roots going back to early Christianity, Unitarian Universalism as an organized movement on this continent comes from two particular religious traditions—Unitarianism and Universalism—which consolidated in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Though both Unitarians and Universalists have conceived of and practiced their faith in individual and original ways, certain themes emerge in their—our—story.

Freedom of Thought and Noncreedalism

Both Unitarians and Universalists resisted and challenged codified beliefs. Initially, Unitarianism developed within the standing order churches of Massachusetts, the direct descendents of the Puritans and Pilgrims. Some ministers started to preach about the ability of people to become more like God and cited Jesus as an example, rather than a savior. Orthodox ministers and church members interpreted this new movement as a violation of creeds accepted within the church. They worked to exclude the new way of thinking and those who promoted it. But the "heretics," who came to be called Unitarians, refused to leave their congregations. Many a congregational battle was pitched, usually over the calling of an unorthodox minister. When the orthodox lost, they often left their churches. Many New England town squares still feature a Unitarian church near a Congregational (now United Church of Christ) church, a circumstance that dates to this tumultuous time at the beginning of the 19th century. Ironically, Unitarians were labeled for their idea of God (a single God, rather than a Trinity), which was not as central to their thinking as their concept of human beings as more divine than depraved. Universalists, on the other hand, left their churches over the heretical idea that God would ultimately save all people, not just those who were chosen, or those who believed. Rejecting the idea of hell, they had set aside part of the creed, so they too, rejected creeds.

Later challenges arose in both Unitarianism and Universalism about whether it was necessary to be Christian, or even to believe in God. Many Unitarians, especially Westerners, joined the Free Religious Association, insisting on absolute freedom of conscience, a notion which, despite arguments, prevailed. Universalists, though a bit more conventional, consistently added a conscience clause to their statements of faith. By the 20th century, they, too, as a group, had set aside many conventions of Christianity. In the 20th century, humanism became an important theological force in Unitarianism.

On-Going Revelation

Because Unitarian Universalism supports freedom of thought and belief and does not require subscribing to a creed, we are free to look for truth in many different places. "Revelation" is the word traditionally used to describe how God becomes known to human beings. We have adopted the word to describe truth more generally. We look in different places for truth which keeps emerging, rather than being sealed, or confined, to a particular book or tradition. We look to our own personal experience, trusting it as much, or more than, the words from the past.

Beginning with the Transcendentalists, Unitarians began to find truth in religions other than Christianity. Emerson, for example, studied the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a Hindu scripture. In 1893, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a prominent Midwestern Unitarian leader, brought the Parliament of World Religions to Chicago, hosting participants from a breadth of religious backgrounds to share their thinking. By that time, Universalists, too, had begun broadening the concept of Universalism beyond the idea of universal salvation to embrace what is universal in human experience.

With revelation not limited to biblical sources or the authority of (mostly male) clergy, women claimed their place in our religious tradition. Thus, Unitarians and Universalists became early supporters of women's rights, including suffrage, the ordination of women, and the economic independence of women from their fathers and husbands.

Around the same time, many Christians were shaken by scientific ideas. Charles Darwin proposed his theory of evolution. Unitarians and Universalists had already realized that science, too, was a source of truth, so had little difficulty with Darwin's ideas. Even harder than Darwin's theory for many orthodox Christians to accept was the 19th-century movement of historical-literary criticism of the Bible, which examined biblical texts as products of a particular time and place. Again, Unitarians and Universalists had no problem with such ideas, because they embraced the ever-widening sphere of truth from a variety of sources.

The Power of Nature

With science as an esteemed source of truth rather than the source of an inconvenient conflict with religion, the Transcendentalist movement, an outgrowth of Unitarianism began to look to nature for life lessons. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" inspired Unitarians to see not only the authority of the natural world, but also to understand humanity, or human nature, as something that was part of the natural order. These Transcendentalist ideals inspired later humanists, as well as mystics and theists.

Once feminists discovered goddess imagery in the 1970s, Pagans began to find a place in Unitarian Universalism. "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions..." was added to the Sources in 1995. These theological commitments to the Earth and Nature—from Transcendentalism to Paganism—have been played out through environmental activism in Unitarian Universalist congregations since the 1970s.

Building the Beloved Community

Both Unitarians and Universalists have focused on this world, rather than the next. Their "this-world" orientation has often moved them to the leading edge of social change.

[Ask: Can you think of examples of this from your experience, or from ideas we have already explored in this workshop?]

Examples of Unitarian and Universalist work to build a Beloved Community include:

- Universalists issued a statement against slavery in 1790.
- Many active 19th-century abolitionists were Unitarian or Universalist.
- Unitarians, especially Henry Whitney Bellows, were among the founders of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which improved conditions for soldiers in the Civil War.
- Universalists were the first religious body to ordain a woman, Olympia Brown, in 1863.
- Unitarians and Universalists, from Horace Mann to the Transcendentalists to Angus MacLean and Sophia Lyon Fahs, championed progressive education.
- The 20th century saw Unitarians active with the NAACP, including John Haynes Holmes (an early member) and A. Powell Davies.
- Many Unitarians and Universalists have been pacifists, including a few, like John Haynes Holmes, who opposed both world wars.
- Proportionately more clergy from Unitarian Universalist congregations than from any other religious group answered Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to Selma to march for voting rights in 1965.
- Unitarian Universalists passed their first resolution for gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights in 1970 and have supported equal marriage strongly across the continent.

