

Our Neighbor's Faith – Unitarian Universalist Association

History and Description¹

The roots of the Unitarian Universalist movement date back to the Reformation, but were scattered. Of particular interest were the concepts of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Two early figures in what would be UU thinking were Michael Servetus and Francis David. Servetus was a Spanish radical, who in 1531 challenged the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, arguing that there is no distinction of beings in God but only manifold aspects of deity. David declared in Transylvania (modern-day Romania), in 1569, that “the equality of Christ with God is only a kind which God gave Christ, with God remaining in His divine sovereignty above everyone else. The “unity” of God is preserved, thus: “Unitarian.”

Such views were not well-received in the early years of the Reformation – neither the Protestants or Roman Catholics tolerated anything even further beyond their already contentious differences (see Anabaptists). Plus, the church and state were not separate, so decisions made by church officials could affect the political rights of a citizen. Francis David was fortunate to find protection after convincing King Sigismund of Transylvania to enact the first edict of religious tolerance in 1568. Michael Servetus, however, was declared a heretic and was burned at the stake in Geneva. He is considered the first Unitarian martyr.

Unitarianism cropped up again in England, employing reason in the interpretation of scripture (think Enlightenment teachings). John Locke, Isaac Newton, and scientist Joseph Priestly were influential promoters of “the reasonableness of Christianity.” Unitarianism showed up in America in New England as a local movement of freedom of conscience and congregational. They rejected doctrines such as predestination, total depravity, the Trinity, and eternal torment, while affirming a belief in the moral capacity of humans, the unity of God, the importance of reason, democracy in religion, and universal salvation. If you've ever read sermons by Jonathan Edwards (like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”), or other Puritan teachings, you can see how the Unitarians would have been at odds with the prevailing religious sentiments of the day.

Unitarian adherents also opposed slavery, not only as an insult to humans, but also to the God in whose image they were created. Ralph Waldo Emerson, better known for his essays and poetry, began his career as a Unitarian minister, applying his ideas of transcendentalism to religion. He stressed adding intuition to human reason as a way of discovering religious truth.

The other U – universalism – developed in eighteenth-century England. The conviction that God elects all humans to salvation, rooted in 1 Corinthians 15:22, was held in various forms all the way back to early church theological foundations in the writings of Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and others. Proponents of universal salvation – or “universalism” for short – argued against the Calvinist belief that some are predestined before birth to heaven and others to hell. Universalist thought came to America in the late eighteenth century, attracting thousands of converts on the American frontier during the nineteenth century.

Both groups carried beliefs in a benevolent God and universal salvation, giving the two groups a common ground in the nineteenth century. Over the course of the twentieth century the two groups worked towards a merger, which took place in 1961, resulting in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Because individualism, reason, and intuition are central tenets of UU identity, Unitarian Universalists hold widely varying convictions about themselves, their church, and the world. Members include UU Christians, Buddhists, and pagans (that is, embracing earth-centered spirituality), and others. Some of the more consistently characteristic beliefs include that God is the evolutionary process by means of which the universe and humans came into being and tend toward perfection. For some, God is a reality to whom prayer is directed; for others, the word *God* is an abstract symbol for the unity of existence.

¹ Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 120-123.

Jesus is regarded as a human being; for some, he is one figure in a line of world prophets from Moses to Buddha to Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr.

The church is considered an association of people who choose to unite for worship, personal growth, and social outreach. Each local group/congregation has full authority to determine its teachings and call a minister. Worship expresses the particular faith of each congregation and its minister. There is no prayer book, liturgical year, or mandatory sacrament. The sermon is prominent. Worship style is flexible and varies widely in its content.

Social concerns and humanitarian initiatives are very important in the UUA: historically, in abolishing slavery, establishing universal education, ensuring voting rights for all adults, and improving conditions for people who are blind, those with mental illness, and those living in poverty. Today's focuses include working for the cause of peace, human rights, the right to choose abortion, separation of church and state, and LGBTQ rights.

Support of women's rights has long been a hallmark of the denomination – they were the first denomination to ordain a woman (Olympia Brown in 1863), and the percentage of female clergy has increased from there.

Because of UU doctrine, they have been excluded from most councils of churches, but they have maintained cordial relationships with many denominations. An official observer from the National Council of Churches attends the UU general assembly.

Statistics: As of 2010, the Unitarian Universalist Association had 211,606 members and 1,022 congregations. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

Experience

There is a UU congregation in Richmond, on Blanton Ave. You can check out their website here: <https://richmondUU.org/#welcome>. You can also check out the UU general website at <https://www.uua.org/>.

How would you respond to the Universalist claim that God saves all people? If Christians (maybe not Lutherans so much, but still), spent less time and focus on preparing of the afterlife, how might that change how we live our lives now?

Comparison with the ELCA²:

<u>Unitarian Universalists</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Believe the Bible is a book written by humans that must be understood in its historical context	1. Believe the Bible is the written witness to God's revelation of saving action through Jesus Christ.
2. Reject creeds as a violation of reason, conscience, and experience.	2. Accept creeds as summaries of Christian truth.
3. Affirm the unity of God.	3. Affirm the unity of the triune God.
4. View Jesus as a great teacher and example, not a person of the Trinity.	4. Believe Jesus is both divine and human in nature, the second person of the Trinity, our Savior.

² Ibid.

5. Teach salvation by character: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).	5. Teach salvation by grace through faith, a gift of God: "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:17b).
6. Worship is more a celebration of the present than a memorial to the past. Historical and experimental forms are intermixed.	6. Worship is a celebration of God's grace and a confession of faith. Liturgical forms are used to glorify and thank God.
7. In terms of governance, freedom of individual conscience is secured in the independence of local congregations. The "continental body" is a democratic association of local churches and fellowships.	7. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.

What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. Lutherans (like those awesome people attending this series) are comfortable learning from others. But not all Lutherans, and not all Christians, share that level of comfort. We could learn from the degree of openness in the UU church in terms of what we may be able to learn from other religions and denominations and the secular world as well.
2. The UUA might have the strongest degree of congregationalism of any group we have discussed so far. The ELCA is more in the middle of the spectrum between completely autonomous congregations and full-on top-down denominations. Would we benefit from each congregation being more independent, or would we miss the resources of the national church?
3. The UU is known for advocating for certain causes and stances. Are Lutherans known for any such cause? Lutherans are known for organizations, like Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Disaster Response, and schools; but do non-Lutherans associate us with any social concern? Would such a "reputation" be beneficial?

Let's pray:

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to fighting between religions, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the Unitarian Universalist Association. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.