

“The Evolution of Unitarianism & Universalism: A Liberal Inheritance”

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Most of you know that unitarianism and universalism began as two different belief systems, not churches, within early Christianity.

For the first 300 years of Christianity, bishops and priests were free to preach their own theology. Unitarian belief was common: God was the father, and Jesus Christ was his son, but not God. The Doctrine of the Trinity was established at the Council of Nicea in 325. The Roman Catholic Church and the Pope became the final authority, and belief in the unity of God was ruled a heresy. (“Heresy” comes from a Greek word that means “choice,” but that isn’t what they meant.)

The universalist belief was that God was a loving God who would not alienate anyone from his presence for all time. Universal salvation was a dominant Christian belief, taught in five of the seven major schools of theology for the first 500 years of Christianity. The fifth ecumenical council in 553 declared universal salvation to be a heresy.

The Roman Catholic Church ruled Europe until the Protestant Revolution began in the 16th century, at which time beliefs in universal salvation and the unity of God again resurfaced. Although the Protestant Revolution opened the doors to new beliefs, it did not usher in a time of religious freedom.

The Spaniard Michael Servetus, with unitarian beliefs, published *On the Errors of the Trinity* in 1531. His views were widely denounced, and he moved from country to country in Europe to avoid persecution. He was burned at the stake for heresy in 1553, by order of the Protestant Geneva governing council in Geneva, Switzerland.

In 1556, Francis David preached against the doctrine of the Trinity in Transylvania. His preaching won over King John Sigismund, as well as many of the people of Transylvania, to Unitarianism. Transylvania had the first formal Unitarian Church in the world.

In 1568, King John Sigismund issued the Edict of Torda, proclaiming religious toleration for the people of Transylvania: each citizen could have his or her own religious beliefs. This was a first in Christendom.

King John Sigismund died young, and without heirs. Transylvania was then ruled by a Catholic King, who eventually imprisoned Francis David, by then Unitarian Bishop, for the crime of innovation. David died in prison in 1579.

Unitarianism became a persecuted faith in Transylvania, but continued through the centuries and is still alive in present day Romania. In spite of its presence in Europe, British Unitarianism seems to have developed on its own, as people reading the Bible could find no basis for the doctrine of the trinity.

The success of the American Revolution influenced liberal religious thought in this new nation. The tiny colonies that had defeated the lion of Britain now doubted whether man was really born with innate depravity, original sin. Surely, God had conceived of man in his own image, with unlimited potential, and therefore would not utterly condemn him. Some famous Unitarians at the time of the American Revolution are Paul Revere, President John Adams, and President John Quincy Adams.

Universalism as its own religion wasn't formalized until after John Murray arrived in the American colonies, in 1770. You heard the story of John Murray and Thomas Potter in the Story for All Ages this morning. When Murray's ministry was reborn, he carried the message of universal salvation throughout New England, and settled in Massachusetts. He remarried, to a leading feminist writer of the age, Judith Sargent Singer, and served the first Universalist church in America, dedicated in 1780. This church, founded by former members of a Congregationalist congregation, successfully sued the town over the taxes they were forced to pay to the Congregationalist church. It was the first step in seeking separation of church and state in Massachusetts.

Murray's preaching and writing spawned more Universalist churches and ministers. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a Universalist, and wrote tirelessly about applying Universalism in the world. He contended that political and social activism was inseparable from Universalism and, in 1790, laid out the programs that Universalists would support for generations to come: opposition to slavery, temperance, prison reform, peace, and working for the poor.

Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian minister and the scientist credited with the discovery of oxygen, became the first *universalist* Unitarian when he publicly declared that he believed in universal salvation, in 1796. The Unitarians were horrified.

In 1802 the oldest Pilgrim Church in America (Plymouth) became Unitarian.

Hosea Ballou, born in 1771, was raised in a strictly Calvinist Baptist family. He was excommunicated from his father's church after adopting a radical universalist belief – that all would go to heaven immediately upon death, because sin was punished during life. With very little education, he became an itinerant Universalist preacher, and clashed with John Murray over differing beliefs. Murray believed that sin during one's life would be punished after death, *before* one was restored to God.

This was the crux of a split that was taken very seriously within Universalism – whether all went to heaven immediately, or only after suffering for their sins while on earth. The conflict was based on the widely held belief that it was threat of punishment that induced people to be good.

The Winchester Profession of Faith, adopted at a Universalist General Convention in 1803, was crafted to agree with John Murray's theology. It was adopted with less conflict than usually surrounds such documents because it contained an "escape clause":

And ... where the brethren cannot see alike, they may agree to differ; and let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

In response, Hosea Ballou published his *Treatise on Atonement* in 1805, the first book published in America openly rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. Ballou used reason to interpret Scripture, and insisted on an all-powerful, all-loving God. He dismantled the trinity by logic so well that, within ten years of its publication, almost all Universalists were *unitarian* in theology, and committed to rational interpretation of the Bible.

The people who would adopt the name Unitarian in 25 years, but were then just various kinds of liberal Christian, didn't like Ballou or his theology, in part because they believed in hell, but mostly because Ballou was uneducated (though brilliant) and his congregants were come-outers from

Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, and German sects, and mostly of the lower classes.

Ballou's belief in immediate restoration to God upon death became known as Ultra-Universalism, while Murray's brand was dubbed Restorationist Universalism. The controversy raged for years, with a schism resulting in 1830 when twelve societies separated from the New England Convention of Universalists. The Restorationists, (those who believed in a period of atonement,) met separately for ten years and then faded away – many had joined Unitarian congregations, which had by that time adopted Restorationist Universalism into its theology.

In 1811 Maria Cook became the first woman to preach in a Universalist pulpit. The Universalists were the first denomination to ordain a woman, Lydia Ann Moulton Jenkins in 1860, and the more famous Olympia Brown in 1863. While the prejudices of the day against women existed within Universalism, there was a general sense of the spiritual equality of women and men.

Harvard Divinity School was established in 1811 as the primary training ground for Unitarian ministers. Until 1870, it was exclusively Unitarian. It is still one of a handful of schools where one can get a UU ministry education.

The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825. By that time, more than 100 of the formerly Congregational churches in Massachusetts had embraced unitarian theology. Most that did not would eventually become United Church of Christ.

In 1835, the Boston Recorder named Universalism “the reigning heresy of the day.” It was one year before Transcendentalism became a major cultural movement, which no doubt won the award in a later year.

Transcendentalism sparked a huge controversy within Unitarianism. Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson stripped Scripture and clergy of their spiritual and moral authority and returned it to the individual to discern through reason and experience. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker denied Christianity's claims of special revelation and widened truth beyond traditional Christian constructs. Emerson and Henry David Thoreau cultivated a personal relationship to the universe through solitude in nature,

and this aspect of spiritual practice remains relevant to UU's today. Other important Transcendentalists were Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, and Theodore Parker.

Theodore Parker wrote to a friend in 1847, "The Universalists are more human than we; they declare the Fatherhood of God and stick at the consequences. Everlasting Happiness to all men. I think they are the most human sect in the land."

Conservative Universalists responded to Transcendentalism by passing a resolution affirming the Bible as God's word revealed and all that was necessary for faith and practice.

But the Universalists were still dedicated to scholarship. Most education at the time was religious in nature, and Universalist parents, tired of their children coming home from elementary school and telling them they were going to hell, began opening their own schools across New England and then into the mid-west. These schools were open to all, and no effort was made to convert children to Universalism.

Perhaps in response to the blatant snobbery of Unitarianism's Harvard graduates, Universalists opened many colleges and universities. Some that survive to this day are Tufts, St. Lawrence, Buchtel (which is now University of Akron), and Throop (which became the California Institute of Technology).

By the mid 1800's Universalism was the fifth or sixth largest denomination in the country, with perhaps as many as 800,000 members. Universal salvation was a welcome alternative to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, wherein God had chosen, before they were born, the "elect" who would be allowed into heaven.

When Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published in America in 1860, conservative Unitarians and Universalists were threatened, along with all of Christendom. What they saw as a scientific attack on the Bible was, however, defended by Universalist theologian Thomas B. Thayer, who cited Darwin's work as proof that a thinking God is still at work in the world, in charge of the evolutionary process. This argument led to a whole-hearted acceptance of evolution by both churches – after four decades of debate.

Trouble was brewing in the country in the mid 1800's, as abolitionists and supporters of slavery clashed over the most divisive issue of the day. Universalists declared slavery to be inconsistent with their beliefs in 1841.

Many prominent Unitarians supported the anti-slavery movement, but as most Unitarians were of the upper classes, there was some sympathy among them for the rights of the gentry of the South.

Two famous Universalists emerged during the Civil War. Clara Barton became the angel of the battlefield, providing care to the wounded where they fell, and recruiting help with resources from all her friends. Following the war she organized the American Red Cross.

Thomas Starr King was a Universalist minister serving the Unitarian Church in San Francisco during the war. He spoke passionately in the towns and gold camps of California, persuaded the new territory to stay with the Union, and raised 1.5 million dollars for the Sanitary Commission. The state of California honored King with a statue in the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington D.C. (In 2009 it was replaced by one of Ronald Reagan.)

The Sanitary Commission was founded by Unitarian Henry Whitney Bellows in 1861, in response to the appalling unsanitary conditions of the Union Army camps. Clara Barton worked with him, and the Sanitary Commission is considered to be the precursor to the American Red Cross.

Unitarian Robert Gould Shaw led the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the first regiment of free black men in the Union Army. He is buried with his troops where he died at Fort Wagner, South Carolina.

During the Civil War years, the practice of Higher Criticism of the Bible was imported from Germany, and was spread in this country by Universalist Orello Cone. Literary science had proved that the Bible was not a unified work, but rather a compilation of writings, and its "authors" were largely names chosen for their fame and authority. The Bible could no longer be accepted as literal truth by learned men.

Shortly after the war, Unitarian Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, today's SPCA. Bergh later used

the new laws against animal cruelty in the first case to protect a child from physical abuse. He went on to found the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and worked tirelessly the rest of his life to enact laws and prosecute cases protecting both animals and children from suffering.

Following the Civil War, Universalists opened schools for freed slaves, to educate children for their new lives in freedom. But the second half of the 1800's saw a decline in Universalism's numbers. The message of universal salvation was so popular, that it had worked its way into a majority of mainstream Protestant faiths, and the Universalist church had less to attract followers.

The Unitarians were slower to recognize women in ministry than the Universalists, but in 1875, twenty-one Unitarian women ministers organized the Iowa Sisterhood and undertook to establish and maintain churches in the Great Plains. One woman, Anna Jane Norris, made it as far west as Fort Collins, Colorado, where she founded a Unitarian church and served from 1883-1887. The Iowa Sisterhood was scorned by their male counterparts back east, but succeeded in founding and/or serving over 30 churches in the Midwest, before they were forced out of ministry in 1900 by the new President of the American Unitarian Association, who "locked the doors" against women ministers.

The first black minister, Joseph Jordan, was ordained by the Universalists in 1889. He served an inter-racial mission school in Norfolk, Virginia. The school was well-supported, both financially and morally, for over 70 years, by local Universalist churches as well as the denomination.

In 1899, the Universalist General Convention in Boston adopted a creed, called the Chicago Declaration that included Unitarian theology and "the certainty of just retribution for sin." With this, the Restorationists had won. There was to be no "get into heaven free" card.

The most influential Universalist of the 20th century was Clarence R. Skinner, the Professor of Applied Christianity at Tufts College from 1914 to 1945. He called for ecumenical social action and sought to transform churches into agencies for transforming the society around them. Skinner's

call to social action has guided, first Universalism, and then Unitarian Universalism, into the 21st century.

The First World War sparked a religious crisis around the world. Questioning the role of God in the face of the atrocities of war, brought in doubts about God's very existence, and ushered in the religious humanist movement. In 1933, the Humanist Manifesto was signed by 34 men, including 15 Unitarian ministers, and one Universalist minister.

Humanism exercised a tremendous influence on Unitarianism and later Unitarian Universalists for much of the 20th century. Some of its principles are firmly embedded in UU beliefs today...

- *Showing love to all humans.*
- *Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.*
- *We gain insight from many sources and all cultures. . . .*
- *We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings.*
- *We are responsible for what we do and become. (uua.org)*

Although humanism was largely not supported by Universalists, the controversy around it probably provoked their new statement of faith in 1935, which included references to:

the supreme worth of every human personality,

and the power of men of good-will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.

The new Statement also sidestepped the authority of the Bible, any definition of the relationship between Jesus and God, the existence of heaven, and any mention of salvation. It placed the responsibility on mankind to heal the world, a cornerstone of humanist belief. Universalists were working toward a universalism that was not about salvation but about universal religion.

As humanist beliefs became more accepted, Unitarians and Universalists realized that Christian faith need not be the only right path, and the writings of Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and other faiths began to be used in services as equal to the Bible.

The Unitarian Service Committee was organized in 1939, before the United States entered World War II. Its Director, Massachusetts minister the Rev. Charles Joy, was stationed in Portugal, that country being a largely non-combatant ally of Great Britain. From there, the Rev. Joy worked with secret agents and messengers to help Jews, Unitarians, and other persecuted people escape from the Nazis. Official-looking papers were an important part of this process, and an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch was commissioned to design an official seal for the Service Committee. Deutsch depicted a flaming chalice inside a circle.

The flaming chalice had been a symbol of religious freedom and freedom of speech in Czechoslovakia since 1415. In that year, Jan Hus was executed. He had been a Roman Catholic priest, fed up with the excesses of the church. He insisted on sharing the communion wine with the people, at a time when the priests reserved it for themselves, and he said the mass in the language of his people, rather than unintelligible Latin. For this he was burned at the stake. The flaming chalice has been a local graffiti of protest ever since. The chalice represented the communion chalice that Hus insisted be shared, and the flame was his own sacrifice.

In the 1970's UU congregations began adopting the flaming chalice as a symbol of Unitarian Universalism.

In the post-war era, as our society became more mobile, interfaith marriages became more common, and many interfaith couples found a home within Unitarian Universalism, broadening the beliefs and practices within our congregations; it is common now to have Catholic practices such as Day of the Dead celebrated in UU churches, and Passover Seders and other Jewish celebrations practiced as well. Today, there are many Buddhist UU's, as well as Hindus, Muslims, Siekhs and others.

In 1949, the Massachusetts Universalist Convention charged the Rev. Kenneth Patton with establishing a new church, the Charles Street Meeting House, which was to be used with a new style of worship and liturgy, and dedicated to being a religion for all. The round sanctuary was ornamented with flags and art objects symbolic of world religions. Its altar was a bookshelf housing sacred writings from around the world.

Patton's innovations shocked the orthodox, but were embraced by both Universalists and Unitarians. The religious symbols on the walls of this church are influenced by the work of the Rev. Patton.

Following the Second World War, people increasingly left their small towns and rural areas and moved into large cities for factory jobs. Smaller Universalist churches were abandoned. Universalist numbers were dwindling to a crisis level. At the same time, Unitarianism was enjoying a growth surge, as liberal religious thought attracted newly college-educated veterans.

Discussions about merging the two denominations had taken place for decades. They had been sharing a hymnal and children's curricula since the 30's. Their youth groups and women's groups both merged in 1953.

Humanism was at its height within Unitarianism, and Universalists feared losing their liberal Christian identity to the "godless Unitarians." In spite of these fears, institutional consolidation took place in May of 1961. The new religion of Unitarian Universalism merged the heart-felt, mission oriented, grassroots demographic of the Universalists, with the intellectual idealism of the Unitarians.

Universalism was swallowed up by Unitarianism to a large extent, but not completely. The Universalist values of social justice are embedded in Unitarian Universalism today. And becoming a church universal, serving all races, cultures and generations, is a UU ideal.

James Luther Adams was a 20th century Unitarian minister who became a leading theologian. His Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism are a part of our UU inheritance today. Put into slightly more accessible language than Adams used, the five smooth stones are these:

- Our religious tradition is a living tradition because we are always learning new truths.
- We freely choose to enter into relationship with one another.
- Working for justice is a moral obligation.
- Good things don't just happen, people make them happen.
- Our faith justifies an ultimate optimism, hope.

These five smooth stones of religious liberalism are broad enough to support all Unitarian Universalism is today.

The Feminist Movement began in the 1960's and over the course of three decades, created sweeping changes in laws and cultural expectations about women. In 1972, there were 23 women in active UU ministry, in 1999, there were 431. Today, well over half of UU ministers are female, and it is expected that women will have at least an equal role in church governance. With feminist theology came the rediscovery of earth-centered beliefs, and the ancient goddess religions. Wiccan and pagan groups emerged. The women's movement brought the water ceremony and candles of joy and concern to UU congregations.

In 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called for clergy members to join him in Selma, Alabama, to march for voting rights for African Americans. The Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association adjourned their meeting to go and march when King's telegram arrived, and 20% of UU ministers traveled to Selma to assist in the civil rights protests. Three white UU ministers were beaten on a sidewalk in Selma, and the Rev. James Reeb died of his injuries. Two weeks later, white UU laywoman, Viola Liuzzo from Detroit, was shot to death for transporting a Negro in her car between Selma and Montgomery.

After the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the UUA's General Assembly passed a resolution to end discrimination against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. In 1971, the first lesbian Services of Union were performed by UU ministers. Over time, the Welcoming Congregation program emerged to help UU congregations welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members and ministers.

The Sexual Revolution had produced conflicting ideas about human sexuality. The UUA published *About Your Sexuality* in 1971, a junior high school curriculum designed to promote accurate information and an opportunity to get questions answered honestly. This was followed by the Owl program, Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education curriculum created by the UUA and United Church of Christ. First released in 1999, OWL has age-appropriate classes for Kindergarten through adults, and promotes healthy values around sexuality and relationships, along with accurate information.

A two-year process between 1983 and 1985 led to most of the current Principles and Sources of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. “Earth-centered spirituality” was added to the Sources in 1994. To prevent the Principles and Sources from becoming a creedal statement, the UUA’s bylaws require that these be reviewed periodically. Proposed revisions were brought to General Assembly in 2009, but voted down by the delegates.

A new UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, was published in 1993, with changes to the wording of traditional hymns largely reflecting humanist beliefs, as well as more gender inclusive language insisted upon by UU women.

Near the turn of the current century, a groundswell of demand for the return of more religion and spirituality in UU congregations and services emerged; it echoed the complaints of Ralph Waldo Emerson from almost 200 years before, who spoke of the “corpse-cold” Unitarianism of his day. Liturgies and music are slowly transforming, congregation by congregation. In 2005, *Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition*, was published to introduce “hymns that touch the heart as well as the head.”

A shooting aimed at “liberals” in a Tennessee UU church in 2008 spawned the “Standing On the Side of Love” program. Today, the Standing on the Side of Love program supports immigrants’ rights; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender equality; and works to counter anti-Muslim bigotry.

In spite of its continual evolution as a religion, Unitarian Universalist churches have not done the best of jobs in keeping up with our rapidly changing society.

For many years, parents who had arrived at Unitarian Universalism by earnest searching, expected their children to conduct their own earnest search. UU children of my generation were told nothing of our own religion, let alone that it might be good thing to be a Unitarian Universalist. The result of this is that today, of the approximately 4,000 youth bridging out of our high school programs every year, less than 150 join a UU congregation, either in their home community or in another city. The other 3,850 each year are part of the Exodus Generation.

We can do better. If Unitarian Universalism is irrelevant to our own children who were lovingly raised as UU's, how can we expect it to be relevant to the ever-increasing number of people who feel no societal pressure to attend any church?

The Rev. Christine Robinson spoke about this at the recent Pacific Western Regional Assembly... Today, when people decide they want to attend a church, they are not looking for religious freedom. They have religious freedom in the secular world. Today, if people decide to go to church, they do so because they want their lives to have meaning and depth. They are looking for spiritual instruction in how to live their lives. They want to be part of a cause, working for good, making a difference in the world. Our churches, this church, must offer that. "One mountain, many paths" is not the message that people are looking for these days.

More and more people today identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." They are interested in spiritual practice, personal enlightenment, peace of mind, being of service, and learning about religion. They are suspicious of institutions like ours, because they think we are "religious but not spiritual." They suspect we are more interested in running our churches than in spiritual growth.

The Rev. Robinson suggests that we become "spiritual but not dogmatic." Offering explicit spirituality, spiritual growth, and spiritual practices, while retaining our non-creedal, non-dogmatic traditions.

Are you ready to begin to imagine what it will take to be a thriving Unitarian Universalist church in the 21st century? To embrace a new generation of Unitarian Universalists? I would love to imagine with you.