

Our Roots

Unitarian Universalists possess a rich heritage and many different ways of relating to it. Some argue that because we lack a shared theology, it is our common history that holds us together. Others relish the freedom to draw on multiple spiritual sources without being bound to any single tradition. Some take pride in knowing that unitarian and universalist ideas (notice the small “u”s) are as old as Christianity itself. Our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is more ancient still. Others stress the distinctly American flavor of our movement, noting that Unitarianism and Universalism (capital “U”s!) were born in the epoch of the Revolution. Still others tell the stories of our partner churches in Transylvania, the British Isles, the Khasi Hills of India, and the Philippines, insisting that their histories are our heritage as well.

Ancient Roots

Given this diversity, one might begin telling the Unitarian Universalist story at many different points in time. UU Buddhists and UU Pagans claim a heritage that is older than Christianity. But most Unitarian Universalists trace their roots to the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

The ideas of “unitarianism,” that God is one being, and “universalism,” that God will save all humanity, can be found in the scriptures of ancient Judaism. For millennia, Jews have declared daily that “the Lord is one,” and cherished the hope that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

These beliefs were part of the rich diversity of early Christianity. Searching the scriptures, some theologians found hope that all humans and even the devil would be restored to harmony with the divine. The official church refused to teach that this was certainly so. Yet Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians continue to teach it as a possibility. The idea of unitarianism was much more controversial. As the Roman Empire was becoming Christian, church leaders declared that Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father were a Trinity, sharing a single divine substance. Those who found this unbiblical or too paradoxical created a rival church, with its own hierarchy and dogmas. Even after that church died out, unitarianism was despised as a heresy by most Christians.

Unitarianism experienced renewal at the time of the Protestant Reformation, in the sixteenth century. Protestants cherished the principle of *sola scriptura*. They relied entirely on the text of the Bible. Those who took this principle furthest rejected the idea of a state church, insisting that Christians should choose voluntarily to follow Christ's path. Among their modern descendents are the Amish and Mennonites. One small wing of this movement also rejected the idea of a Trinity as unbiblical. They planted churches first in

Poland and then Transylvania, where a Unitarian king embraced a policy of religious freedom.

The Polish church eventually disappeared, while Transylvanian Unitarianism survives today. Unitarian ideas reappeared in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and Ireland. Those who held them, including the philosopher John Locke, blended a commitment to biblical authority with the Enlightenment's stress on reason. Unlike the deists on one side and orthodox Christians on the other, they refused to choose between reason and revelation. Their first congregation was the Essex Street Chapel. Organized in 1774 by a former Anglican priest named Theophilus Lindsey, it set the tone for similar congregations in the American colonies. Universalist ideas were also promoted in England during these years, first by the mystical Philadelphia Society led by Jane Leade in the late seventeenth century. A century later, revivalist James Rely taught universalism on the grounds that Christ had died to save not individuals but all humanity as a single body.

American Founding

Though European movements influenced their North American sisters, the origin of Universalism and Unitarianism in the United States did not involve the transplanting of European institutions to new soil. Nor was there a single “founding moment” for either tradition. Several different groups held unitarian or universalist beliefs. They came together only gradually.

The first people in North America to teach universal salvation may have been Germans who came to Pennsylvania for religious freedom. Their mystical Christianity also inspired them to live in celibate community, practice alchemy, and wait for the end of the world. The first explicitly Universalist congregation was planted in Gloucester, Massachusetts, by John Murray, an English immigrant who had learned from James Rely that an all-powerful God had predestined everyone to be saved. But the largest number of early Universalists came out of Baptist churches in western New England. Skeptical of educated ministers, they read the Bible for themselves and cherished debates with neighbors who read it differently. These diverse communities began to organize a General Convention in 1790. They had little in common other than their belief in universal salvation and a fierce opposition to state-sponsored religion. This put them in conflict with the Puritan or "Standing Order" congregations of New England, which received tax support well into the nineteenth century.

The first Unitarian congregations in the United States were inspired by Englishman Joseph Priestley. Priestley was a chemist who discovered oxygen, a friend of Thomas Jefferson, and a theologian who insisted that Jesus was no more than human. In 1784, his writings convinced the minister of King's Chapel in Boston to eliminate references to the Trinity from that congregation's liturgy. Ten years later, Priestley immigrated to the United States and helped found congregations in Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania.

Like the Universalists, Priestley was wary of state-sponsored religion. But ironically, several Standing Order churches in the neighborhood of Boston embraced a milder form of Unitarianism. They believed that Jesus was more than human but less than divine. They also stressed the goodness of humanity. While their Puritan ancestors had seen humans as depraved, they had absorbed the optimistic Enlightenment philosophy taught at Harvard College. The debate over these new ideas caused a schism among the churches in Massachusetts. Though the Unitarians were reluctant to separate from their more orthodox brothers and sisters, they created the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

Each fledgling denomination had a theological champion. The Universalists' Hosea Ballou was a fiery debater who delighted in clever interpretations of the Bible. He taught that Jesus had died not to appease an angry God but to soften the hard hearts of humanity. And he took the radical position that even the worst sinners will go straight to heaven. Other Universalists speculated that some would be purified by temporary hellfire.

The Unitarians' William Ellery Channing was a reluctant radical. He loved peace, and helped organize opposition to the War of 1812. He hesitated to organize a separate denomination, but eventually became its most eloquent spokesman. He also hesitated to speak out against slavery. When abolitionist friends persuaded him to join their cause, he found himself alienated from the wealthy congregation he had served for decades.

Though Channing was a Unitarian and Ballou a Universalist, each man appreciated aspects of the other tradition. Ballou was a proud champion of Priestleyan unitarianism. Channing was not a universalist, but his faith in the human capacity to grow in likeness to the divine drew on the same spiritual streams as ancient universalism. The two men scarcely acknowledged one another, though they ministered in the same Boston neighborhood. Today's Arlington Street Church is heir to both of their congregations.

Ministers were not the only people who helped build up the two traditions. John Murray's wife, Judith Sargent Murray, was a powerful leader and advocate of women's rights. She began demanding equal access to education in 1779, and composed the first Universalist catechism three years later. Lucy Barns was disabled by asthma, but wrote letters to spread the Universalist faith. Catharine Sedgwick, one of the nation's most popular writers, incorporated Unitarian themes into her novels. Unitarian Hannah Adams expressed her liberal religious convictions in one of the first dictionaries of world religions.

Heretics, Reformers and Institution Builders

Three different sorts of leaders helped nineteenth-century Unitarianism and Universalism evolve. First, there were the heretics—unfettered thinkers who reached beyond inherited theologies. Abner Kneeland, who called himself a pantheist rather than a Christian, left the Universalist ministry to lead Boston's Society of Free Enquirers. He was the last person

jailed for blasphemy in the United States. Ralph Waldo Emerson shocked the faculty of Harvard Divinity School by urging future ministers to preach from their own souls rather than from scripture. The Transcendentalist movement he launched transformed American literature as well as the Unitarian ministry. During the 1850s, roughly half of all Universalist ministers embraced the Spiritualist movement, which sought a scientifically verifiable path to religious truth. A generation later, Unitarians and Universalists were the first to embrace Darwinian science as an ally rather than an enemy of faith.

Other Unitarians and Universalists were reformers. The heart of their religion was building a more just and inclusive society. Universalist shoemaker William Heighton helped launch the labor movement by calling for a political party composed entirely of "Working Men." The brothers Charles and John Murray Spear, both Universalist ministers, befriended prisoners and fought to end the death penalty. Unitarian Lydia Maria Child risked her career as a writer of children's books by demanding immediate abolition of slavery. Ministers Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson were so opposed to slavery that they took up arms to defend fugitives from the South. Adin Ballou, who served both Unitarian and Universalist congregations, was a staunch abolitionist, absolute pacifist, and creator of a utopian community. His writings on nonviolence inspired Leo Tolstoy and Mohandas Gandhi. Universalist and Unitarian women were among the first to be ordained in the United States. Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Olympia Brown combined ministry with agitation for women's suffrage.

Contemporary Unitarian Universalists cherish the memory of the heretics and the reformers. But we would not remember them at all if it weren't for the institution builders. Among the Unitarians, denominational president Henry Whitney Bellows led the way in making space for both Transcendentalists and liberal Christians in a single church. And the Universalists' "grasshopper missionary," Quillen Shinn, hopped to many unlikely corners of America with the message of God's limitless love.

Reaching Out

Unitarians and Universalists never held a monopoly on liberal religion. Many Unitarian Universalists today hold views similar to the eighteenth-century deists and nineteenth-century Free-thinkers. Those groups taught a "religion of reason" that only gradually found a home in our tradition. Some of the founders of Unitarianism and Universalism were active Freemasons, and from that tradition they took a commitment to religious tolerance and brotherly love. Unitarians and Universalists have long felt a kinship with the Quaker tradition, with its emphasis on the "inner light" in each person. They also reached out to the Reform movement in Judaism, which stressed ethics over ritual. The Ethical Culture movement founded by a rabbi's son, Felix Adler, abandoned belief in God altogether and worked closely with the radical wing of Unitarianism.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many Congregationalists, Methodists, and other Protestants were preaching

a liberal theology similar to that of the Unitarian and Universalist founders. They also proclaimed a "social gospel": true religion was about building a better world. Unitarians and Universalists worked closely with them. At Harvard, Francis Greenwood Peabody introduced sociology into the curriculum for future ministers. More radical activists created organizations that we now think of as secular. Universalist Charles Vail was the national organizer of the Socialist Party. Unitarian Roger Baldwin was the first leader of the American Civil Liberties Union. Unitarians Mary White Ovington and John Haynes Holmes were among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. With Universalist Clarence Skinner, Holmes also launched a network of activist "community churches." Among them was Egbert Ethelred Brown's Harlem Community Church, an important meeting place for African Americans and West Indians, and for black socialists and nationalists. Reformers like Holmes, Brown, and Skinner worked closely with a new wave of heretics. Calling themselves "humanists," these heretics put their faith in science and humanity rather than God. Humanist leaders John Dietrich and Curtis Reese both came to Unitarianism from more conservative denominations. Several Unitarians and one Universalist, Clinton Lee Scott, signed the "Humanist Manifesto" that announced their ideas to the world. Meanwhile, other Universalists redefined their tradition to focus on the wisdom of all world faiths.

Once again, institution builders were flexible enough to win the heretics back. As leader of the Massachusetts Univer-

salists, Scott invited a Unitarian humanist named Kenneth Patton to launch an experimental congregation. Its members studied global faiths and contemporary science, treating their church as a workshop for the future. Unitarian president Frederick May Eliot embraced humanists and reached out to Universalists, hoping both groups would help him build a united liberal church.

Unitarianism finally transcended its New England roots through the fellowship movement of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In communities from Montgomery, Alabama, to Boulder, Colorado, lay people created congregations without ministerial oversight. Many were closely tied to colleges or research centers. Others provided a religious home for radical activists in conservative neighborhoods. Some of the fellowships have grown into thousand-member congregations. Others remain small and feisty.

Toward Beloved Community

The new congregations brought their energy into the Unitarian Universalist Association, founded in 1961 as the fruit of Eliot's dream. Many congregations and individuals still proudly call themselves "Unitarian" or "Universalists." Others, especially those who have come to the tradition since consolidation, claim a fully "Unitarian Universalist" identity. Unitarian Universalists played a vital role in the social change movements of the 1960s. Building on the legacy of the NAACP founders, Unitarian minister Homer Jack helped

launch the northern sit-in movement in the 1940s, and he guided our tradition's social justice work in the 1960s. Most of the white lawyers who supported Martin Luther King Jr.'s work in Montgomery were members of the local UU fellowship. Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb and Unitarian Universalist housewife Viola Liuzzo were martyred in Selma, Alabama, where they had joined hundreds of UU ministers in response to the murder of a local African-American activist named Jimmie Lee Jackson. Reeb had been a community minister at Boston's Arlington Street Church. Two years later, that same congregation hosted an interfaith liturgy at which opponents of the Viet Nam War prayed together as they burned their draft cards.

Not everyone agreed on the best way to foster justice and peace. Many Unitarian Universalists, both white and black, embraced the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. They hoped that economic and cultural empowerment would make beloved community possible. Others feared that Black Power was a betrayal of the integrationist ideal. The General Assembly of 1968 committed \$1 million to black-led economic development projects. Debate over that decision consumed the denomination for the next two years. Leaders reduced funding for empowerment, citing a budget crisis. People on both sides left the tradition, hurt and angry. Others stayed or returned, making the struggle against racism and for beloved community one of our defining commitments.

Unitarian Universalism responded more comfortably to feminism and LGBT liberation. When Rev. James Stoll came

out as gay in 1969—the first minister in any tradition to do so—he was embraced by other Unitarian Universalists. Our pioneering sexuality education curriculum, *About Your Sexuality*, was expanded to honor sexual diversity. Similarly, a small contingent of women ministers swelled to a majority within a few decades. The 1977 Women and Religion resolution began a process of removing sexist language and practices from our shared life. As women explored goddess-centered practices, they made neo-paganism an integral part of the spiritual mosaic of our faith.

If the late 1960s were the tumultuous adolescence of Unitarian Universalism, our movement has since settled into a stable maturity. Membership declined in the 1970s but has grown since then. This is because of our appeal to spiritual seekers, social activists, and interfaith families. In most UU congregations today, Christians, humanists, Jews, Buddhists, pagans, seekers, and others build religious community together. We join in the fight for immigrant rights and for marriage equality, and we help one another find sustaining spiritual practices. Our diverse national leadership guides us on the journey toward beloved community. As we continue moving forward, we look back with gratitude to the heretics, reformers, and institution builders who came before us.

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Resources

UU World, the magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA), aims to help its readers build their faith and act on it more effectively in their personal lives, their congregations, their communities, and the world. The print magazine is published quarterly in February, May, August, and November. You can subscribe or read a weekly issue of the free online edition at www.uuworld.org.

The UUA also publishes a number of pamphlets intended to answer questions you may have about Unitarian Universalism. You can read these online by visiting www.uua.org/pamphlets.

The following books are available from the UUA Bookstore: 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108-2800, telephone (800) 215-9076, website www.uua.org/bookstore.

George Kimmich Beach. *Questions for the Religious Journey: Finding Your Own Path*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002.

Ellen Brandenburg, ed. *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2007.