

# Unitarianism

All material taken from Fritz Ridenour's  
So What's the Difference?,  
along with the following websites:  
[www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org) & [www.uureading.org](http://www.uureading.org)

# Definition

- Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people and religious beliefs [**key concept**]. It celebrates the creative capacity within all people, and the connection we share with each other and all of creation. Rather than professing a specific creed or set of beliefs, church members gather to support one another in their own search for truth and meaning in life.
- No one will tell you what you must believe, or that there is only "one way" or book that contains all Truth. We help our children discover that religion is for joy and for life, and that the wonder and mystery of the Universe can be discovered in many places and through many eyes.

# Definition

- Unitarian Universalist congregations provide a religious home to people seeking a welcoming spiritual community, to many interfaith families, and to people who embrace diverse beliefs or theologies.
- This "free church" tradition traces its history to 16th century Europe, and in North America to the first Pilgrim and Puritan settlers [**true, but misleading**]. It has numbered among its members five U.S. presidents and such noteworthy Americans such as Thomas Jefferson, Clara Barton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Susan B. Anthony, singer Pete Seeger, and even the late actor Christopher Reeve.

# History

- The first Unitarians were the Monarchians, a group which was prevalent in the Church from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>. They believed there was no such thing as the Trinity, and they were soundly refuted.
- Unitarian thinking emerged again in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the teachings of Arius, who claimed Christ was a created being and there was no Trinity.
- Arius' teachings were condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., where he was deemed a heretic.

# History

- Unitarianism never went away fully, re-emerging in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Italy & Poland within the RC Church through the teachings of Laelius Socinus and his nephew Faustus Socinus.
- In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Unitarian ideas emerged again in England via the teachings of John Biddle.
- By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas made their way to America through people like Jonathan Mayhew & Charles Chauncey, who helped change Harvard from its original Christian position to Unitarianism.

# History

- Perhaps the most influential American Unitarian was William Ellery Channing, whose pamphlet on the basic beliefs of Unitarianism became the most well-read pamphlet in America since Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* helped to spark the American Revolution.
- The UUA, headquartered in Boston, MA, was formed in 1961 through the consolidation of two historical denominations, the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association. More than 1050 congregations in North America belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association.
- Estimates of members range from as few as 200,000 worldwide to as many as 500,000 in America alone.

# Teachings & Practices

- Formed the basis for liberal theology, which rapidly developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries via teachings of men like German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who believed
  - there was no transcendent God. Instead, man's feelings were his "ground of reality."
  - Jesus was not God but a special man whose feelings of god-consciousness reached the highest perfection.

# Teachings & Practices

- Unitarians & liberals agree, for the most part, on the following:
  - The Bible is not the Word of God. This entails a rejection of Christian doctrines derived from it. Some say parts of the Bible may contain the Word of God mixed with superstition.
  - God is not a Person. Rather, He is thought of as a Force, an Oversoul, a Prime Mover, or even as being dead.
  - Jesus is merely a man, though an exceptional one like Moses & Buddha.
  - Theology can change all the time.
  - Humankind should not look to God for help. Instead, we are our own saviors. People are not sinners, and all we are required to do is lead a good life & follow the Golden Rule.
  - There is no heaven or hell, and there is no need of salvation through Jesus Christ. The very idea of hell is an insult to Unitarians.

# Teachings & Practices

- Unitarianism puts man above God, so it was only natural for it to become linked to secular humanism, which became popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of *The Human Manifesto I & II*. Among the many claims in the manifestos, two that stand out are there is no God and the universe has always existed.
- With the rise of many New Age cults embracing Unitarianism, many unitarians were uncomfortable with the blatant atheistic worldview of humanism, causing them to move towards a more “spiritual” position.
- “Spiritual” in those context refers, not to biblical thought, but to New Age or pagan spirituality (i.e. monistic pantheism).

# Principles of the UUA

- *We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote*
- The inherent worth and dignity of every person [**yet supports Planned Parenthood**];
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible [**by whose standards?**] search for truth [**whose truth?**] and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

# Principles of the UUA

- The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:
- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

# Principles of the UUA

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

# Purposes of the UUA

- The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

# Purposes of the UUA

- The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member societies and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, color, sex, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

# Purposes of the UUA

- Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test.

# Beliefs in the UUA

- Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion that encompasses many faith traditions. Unitarian Universalists include people who identify as Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and others. As there is no official Unitarian Universalist creed, Unitarian Universalists are free to search for truth on many paths.
- To quote the Rev. Marta Flanagan, "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 non-creedal religion. Ours is a free faith."
- Although we uphold shared principles, individual Unitarian Universalists have varied beliefs about everything from scripture to rituals to God.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Christianity

- For many Unitarian Universalists, Jesus and Christian teachings provide insight into understanding how to live our lives. One of the shared sources of our faith is "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."
- As one Unitarian Universalist wrote: "Jesus' message remains strong in our efforts to create a beloved community here on earth, impelling us to witness to the injustices of this time." (Bruce Southworth) And Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson says, "Jesus [gives us] the strength to fight, the courage to love, and hearts that do not give up on anyone."

# Beliefs in the UUA: Christianity

- The Bible and its many interpretations have largely shaped our Unitarian Universalist history. Today, it is used in most Unitarian Universalist congregations as one of many sources of inspiration and reflection. To quote one member, "I claim the Bible as one more chapter, among several religious texts, in the Unitarian Universalist guide to living."
- This is not the only view of Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity within our faith. Unitarian Universalists can be Christian, Humanist, Pagan, Buddhist, Jewish, atheist, and more. A portion of Unitarian Universalists today identify as Christians, but even some Unitarian Universalists who do not identify primarily as Christians find inspiration in Christian ideas. Because of the freedom within our faith, there are many differing views regarding the role of Christianity in our religious community.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Humanism

- Humanism is a philosophy that stresses the human aspect of life here and now, and puts the responsibility for ethical behavior upon each individual. Humanism also focuses on rational rather than supernatural religious explanations. Modern-day Religious Humanism is largely derived from the writings of early American Unitarian Humanists, including Joseph Priestley, Thomas Jefferson, and John Haynes Holmes.
- Almost half of Unitarian Universalists today define themselves as Humanists. They comprise the largest spiritual identity group within Unitarian Universalism. Given this, it is not surprising that much of Unitarian Universalist faith and worship is grounded in Humanist thought.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Paganism

- There are many Wiccans, witches, Pagans, and people with other earth-based spiritualities who lead and worship in Unitarian Universalist congregations. At last count, 19 percent of our members identified with an Earth/Nature centered faith. This is one of the fastest-growing groups within our faith.
- The sources of inspiration for the UU faith are too many to be counted, but delegates from each congregation have agreed that one of the predominant sources of our faith is, "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

# Beliefs in the UUA: Paganism

- In addition to modern Paganism, many Unitarian Universalists find spiritual inspiration in other forms of nature-based spirituality, including simple seasonal reverence, modern Transcendentalism, and other nature-honoring paths.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Theism/Deism

- Theism is the belief in the existence of a god or gods. The word "theism" does not specify the kind or number of god(s), nor the religious context for that belief. Types of theism include monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, and Deism.
- Deism is a specific type of Theism, and is considered to be a separate spiritual path. Deists believe in a God, but believe that logic and reason are the only sources of true knowledge. They also believe that the divine does not intervene in the workings of the world. Deist thought is quite common within Unitarian Universalism.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Theism/Deism

- Most Unitarian Universalists believe in a god or gods, though only 13 percent identify as Theist/Deist. Other Unitarian Universalists who believe in a god or gods identify as Christians, Jews, Hindus, Pagans, and others.
- The opposite of theism is atheism, which is the lack of a belief in a god or gods. Atheism is also welcome within Unitarian Universalism.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Buddhism

- Buddhism has come to play a noticeable role in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. An average Sunday service might feature readings from the Dalai Lama, and you might find a meditation workshop or Buddhist book group any evening of the week.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Buddhism

- It is not surprising that Buddhism resonates for so many Unitarian Universalists, given the amount of philosophical overlap between the two religions. The most central ideas that the two religions share are that individuals are responsible for their own spiritual well-being, and that each individual's experiences and thoughts are valid sources of religious authority.
- Although at last count only 4 percent of Unitarian Universalists defined themselves as Buddhists, many more find inspiration in Buddhist thought, practice, and ritual.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Judaism

- Judaism is increasingly prevalent within Unitarian Universalism. At last count, 1.3 percent of Unitarian Universalists identified as Jewish, and 25 percent of Unitarian Universalist congregations reported the presence of a strong Jewish theological perspective.
- [The] idea of love and action makes Unitarian Universalist Judaism very dynamic and meaningful. As Unitarian Universalist minister Liz Lerner says, “Judaism is filled with morality and visions of justice that are moving and profound.”

# Beliefs in the UUA: Judaism

- Even Unitarian Universalists who are not Jewish are often inspired by what Judaism brings to our religious community. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations now celebrate some of the major Jewish holidays. Intergenerational Passover Seders are special favorites, and the High Holy Days (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) provide a time for all congregational members, Jewish or not, to examine their lives and atone.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Hinduism

- Hinduism is warmly welcomed within Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism shares ideas found in Hinduism, including the importance of a personal search for Truth, the idea that all things are connected, and a respect for other religious paths. Unitarian Universalism welcomes many ideas about god, including polytheism.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Hinduism

- Most Unitarian Universalist congregations follow a worship service format that is very different from traditional Hindu worship, leaving most Hindu Unitarian Universalists to pursue the ritual aspects of their faith in their own ways. This may be why there are few traditional Hindus who regularly attend Unitarian Universalist congregations. Despite these differences in ritual, our congregations offer a warm welcome to anyone of the Hindu faith.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Atheism/ Agnosticism

- Atheists (people who do not believe in a god) and Agnostics (people who think that we cannot know whether a god exists) are more than welcome within Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism is unusual in its belief that a person can be very religious, spiritual, moral, etc. without believing in a god. There is no requirement to believe in a god of any sort within our faith. At last count, 19% of Unitarian Universalists said that they did not believe in any type of god.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Atheism/ Agnosticism

- Some Unitarian Universalist congregations are more Deistic than others. While some congregations regularly refer to God in worship and prayer, others have a much more varied approach to addressing the religious spirit. Even in those congregations where they often use the word "God," it's ok if you don't believe in a god.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Islam

- For some Unitarian Universalists, the Koran and the life and words of Mohamed are an inspiration, offering insight into how to lead their individual lives. Other Unitarian Universalists, coming from other faiths, have no interaction with the Koran or Mohamed, and instead focus on the texts and leaders of their own spiritual traditions.
- There are not yet many people who connect strongly with Islam within Unitarian Universalism: only 0.1 percent of our current members identify as Muslim. Despite these small numbers, our congregations offer a warm welcome to anyone of the Islamic faith.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Islam

- Because of recent world events, many Unitarian Universalists have sought out more information on Islam, and more Muslims around the world have begun learning about our faith. We are very excited about this exchange, and hope to continue it in the future.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- Because of the flexibility in our faith, people hold many different views on almost all spiritual issues. Unitarian Universalism accommodates a wide range of beliefs.
- **God:** A belief in God is welcomed but not required within Unitarian Universalism. Eighty-one percent of Unitarian Universalists believe in God, and 19 percent do not believe in God.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- **Afterlife:** One theological issue many people are curious about is Unitarian Universalism's view of the afterlife. Historically, Unitarians believed in a traditional Christian Heaven and Hell, while Universalists believed in Universal Salvation; that is, that everyone will go to Heaven. Today, some Unitarian Universalists believe in Heaven, some in reincarnation, and some in no afterlife at all. Unitarian Universalism is primarily directed towards this life, not the next.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- **Sin:** More than 150 years ago our Unitarian forbearers rejected the theological doctrine of original sin. They believed, as we do today, that people are inherently good, and that it is our most precious gift, free will, that allows us sometimes to act wrongly, rather than predestination [**not a Christian view of predestination**] or external temptation. While the traditional concept of sin is no longer part of Unitarian Universalist theology, a small number of Unitarian Universalists believe that divine consequences attach to all of one's actions. Others believe in general karmic effects or the principle of reciprocity, that all actions have corresponding consequences. Still others find no compelling evidence for any direct, external spiritual repercussions for either good or bad behavior. Despite these variations in beliefs, all Unitarian Universalists share a deep obligation to act with justice and compassion in accordance with Unitarian Universalist values.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- **What we don't believe:** Though Unitarian Universalism doesn't tell its members what to believe, not all beliefs are acceptable within our faith. Beliefs that are hateful or go against our principles wouldn't fit within Unitarian Universalism [**inherent contradiction**].

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- **Morality:** Many people ask how we can have religious morals without agreeing on whether heaven, hell, judgment, sin, and damnation exist. Most Unitarian Universalists would probably tell you that their own moral code has little to do with their ideas of the afterlife, and more to do with their actions in this life. Unitarian Universalist morality is grounded in our religious principles and the sources of our faith, as well as in each individual's beliefs and experiences.

# Beliefs in the UUA: Other

- "One could not be considered a Unitarian Universalist and believe that subscription to specific doctrines or creeds are necessary for access to God or spirituality or membership in our congregations. Unitarian Universalists could not believe that God favors any group of people based on any inherent qualities, such as skin color, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.—or that any group of people is more worthy of access to opportunities than any other as a result of these qualities. We don't believe that autocratic, undemocratic or overly hierarchical systems are appropriate methods of organizing our congregations or the larger society. We don't believe that humanity has the right or moral authority to exploit the environment or other life forms with whom we share this planet."

# Holidays

- Celebration of traditional holidays in all religions, plus civic ones in each country, along with their own two unique ones:
- **The Flower Communion** usually takes place in the spring near the time of Easter. In this ceremony, members of the congregation are asked beforehand to bring a flower to the Sunday service. Upon entering the sanctuary, each person places his or her flower on the altar or in a shared vase. The flowers are blessed by the minister or congregation during the ceremony, and the sermon usually reflects upon the flowers' symbolism. At the end of the service, each person brings home a flower other than the one that he or she brought.
- Reginald Zottoli wrote "The significance of the flower communion is that as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with our church community: it would not be the same without each and every one of us."

# Holidays

- **The Water Communion**, also sometimes called Water Ceremony, was first used at a Unitarian Universalist worship service in the 1980s. Many UU congregations now hold a Water Communion once a year, often at the beginning of the new church year (September).
- Members bring to the service a small amount of water from a place that is special to them. During the appointed time in the service, people one by one pour their water together into a large bowl. As the water is added, the person who brought it tells why this water is special to them. The combined water is symbolic of our shared faith coming from many different sources. It is often then blessed by the congregation, and sometimes is later boiled and used as the congregation's "holy water" in child dedication ceremonies and similar events.

# “Searching for Acceptance”

- Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wezp1W2HKIU>

# Evangelism

- Pray & trust the Spirit to move during your conversations.
- UU's claim the Bible is a myth and that personal experience, conscience, & reason are the final authority. Discuss with them the Bible's own claims re: its inspiration (cf. Matt. 22:29; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:16-21), along with historical proof of the accuracy of the texts (see Lee Strobel).
- UU's believe "God is one," but their definition of "God" refers to nature & conscience at work in humankind. They also believe Jesus was special, but He was not God. Discuss with them the sovereignty of God (cf. Is. 64:8; Heb. 11:3), along with Jesus' own claims re: His divinity (cf. Jn. 10:30; 14:9).

# Evangelism

- UUUs do not believe that we are born in sin, and, subsequently, that God forgives our transgressions. Discuss with them the biblical concept of sin (i.e. its our nature, manifesting itself in individual and corporate acts —cf. Rom. 3:23; 5:19), along with the reality of our own experiences and consciences. Inherent guilt is not a social construct, but the reality of a consciences that knows it has violated the commands of a Holy and Just God.
- UUUs pride themselves on being tolerant of all beliefs, so long as said beliefs do not claim to have exclusive knowledge of salvation, or do not promote hatred. Discuss the inherent contradiction of this belief.

# Evangelism

- UUUs reject the idea that God sacrificed His Son Jesus to atone for human sin, believing instead salvation by character. Discuss with them the idea that only Christ's blood can atone for sin (cf. Rom. 3:24, 25; Heb. 9:22), and that salvation is a free gift, which no amount of "good" works can merit (Eph. 2:8, 9).
- UUUs do not believe in heaven or hell, instead concentrating only on this life. Discuss with them the realities of heaven and hell (cf. 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Heb. 9:27).
- Call UUUs—and all people—to accept Christ, presenting them with Christ's own question: "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15)