

## **Association Sunday sermon “Honoring Our Association”**

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### **History.**

Introduction. I want to reassure those to whom it matters, that in discussing this morning just who these Unitarians and Universalists are, we’re not going to get into the deep weeds of history and doctrine. But we do need some overview of the two great strands of spirit, thought, and practice that form our modern faith.

Unitarianism arose originally, and got its name, from opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity

- Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
- God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

No doubt some of us were raised this hymn and that idea.

The original Unitarians’ opposition was two-fold—that it was unscriptural, and that it was contrary to reason.

The orthodox didn’t mind the contrary-to-reason objection because so much of what they believed—and believe today—is contrary to reason. Faith, and entry into heaven, and the comfort of having these matters settle and certain—these, not reason, is what counts for them.

But it’s also unscriptural, meaning that the concept of triune God appears nowhere in the Bible. The Council of Nicaea in 325 made the Son “of the same substance” as the Father, and 50 years later Athanasius incorporated the Spirit or Logos.

You no doubt recall from last week that the Arian heresy considered the Son subordinate to the Father, and that Unitarians were often persecuted as Arians.

You already know that the orthodox burned a number of our people at the stake for that belief. The last person executed for heresy in Britain was a Scots student who was overheard denying the Trinity.

In my view, there are more interesting sources for the idea of God as One. Two of them are Judaism and Islam. For all the difficulty we're having with Muslims these days, we do share the idea of monotheism. Mohammed is not a god, but a prophet. In my view, Trinitarian Christianity is polytheism.

An even more interesting source for small-u unitarianism is the intuition that all Creation is of one piece. Long before our science began to prove the connections, our people were thinking in terms of not of dualism, of light and dark, good and evil, elect and damned, heaven and hell, but of a beneficent Unity of all things. Our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle states it pretty well: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

You can safely say that some of us don't merely respect, but worship the web of all existence: the Earth-centered religious, and radical ecologists.

Some of us call all existence God. There's a name for that, of course—pantheism, and in my view, pantheism is the flip-side of Unitarianism: God is One means also All is God, doesn't it?, unless your God is One, but separate from the rest of Creation, which brings a considerable set of difficulties.

The point is that this Unitarianism has always been a thinking person's religion, essentially non-supernatural, focused on life in the here and now, not so much the hereafter.

The Unitarians have always paid more attention to reason and science for spiritual advancement than to theology. We believe we humans are essentially good.

And we're non-dogmatic, meaning that we differ from many other religions in that we believe in helping people find their own spiritual path rather than defining it for them. [from the British General Assembly]

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Intro to Universalism --

There's a scene in one of my favorite movies, where Ian McKellan does a sendup of a hellfire preacher, filling the congregants of the Church of the Quivering Brethren with thrill and dread:

Ye come to sit and contemplate the torment that awaits ya, quiverin', imaginin' your wretched self stretched out over red-hot grid irons, while demons poke you with pitchforks,

mockin' your cries, tauntin' you with visions of cool babbling brooks and gentle grassy meadows.

You. And You. And all you up in front--you think by sittin' up here, close to me, you'll escape the flames, aye? Bah! You'll burn with the rest! You're alllllllll damned!

Universalism arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. in opposition to the anti-enlightenment fundamentalist revival belief in and threat of Hell, of torture everlasting in the afterlife.

Have you ever stopped to consider what that means, what going to Hell means? It means that after a million million years of unceasing, unbearable torture, your punishment has not yet even begun. That's what damnation to eternal hellfire means.

The Universalist could not believe that the God of this marvelous creation, of these marvelous lives we get to live--would punish his children like that. They believed that in the end, all souls would be reconciled with God. They believed in Universal salvation.

Unlike the Unitarians, the Universalists tended to be not Boston Brahmins who became Senators and Presidents of Universities and of the United States, but ordinary people, middle class and working class. They tended to be simple Christians, ones of whom I think we can say Jesus would have approved, on account of their modesty, and good heart.

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In short, as the very old joke goes, the Universalists believe God is too good to damn us, while the Unitarians believe we are too good to be damned.

The two faiths chugged along during the 19<sup>th</sup> C. and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, spinning off a steady stream of famous names that we'll take pride in later this year.

But by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century there was trouble. One was the triumph of science over superstition in the minds and hearts of not just the elite Unitarians, but all classes, and so Unitarianism became less needed than before.

The other was that the fear of hellish punishment was fading. People found other reasons to be good than Hope of Heaven and Fear of Hell, and so Universalism became less needed, less refreshing than before.

Although the idea of merger was discussed as early as 1865, these two little liberal Christian traditions now needed each other to thrive (in the case of the Unitarians) and (in the case of the Universalists) to survive.

In the 1950s, talk of merger heated up, and in 1960, the agreement was made, and in early 1961 the merger was complete.

The rest, as they say, is Prologue.

So--why should you love, honor, and support the UUA?

- **Excellent personal leadership.** Of the 7 UUA Presidents prior to the current one, Peter Morales, we've had a series of strong leaders, particularly in the last quarter century: Bill Schultz, later head of Amnesty International USA (85-93), John Buehrens (93-01) minister at Needham, Mass., who will be in this pulpit in February, and Bill Sinkford (01-09), who will be installed next week as minister of one of our largest and most prestigious Societies, First Unitarian of Portland. 1500 members! These leaders' consistently strong, principled responses to national and world events and core issues has brought credit and good publicity to our name. [PM def. Laurel Hallman]

- **Steady, courageous institutional leadership.** Our denomination has been prominent in support and leadership of various progressive issues.

We have long been the leaders in the suffrage movement, and feminism, and equality for women, including poor women and women of color. My first real encounter with inclusive language came in 1969 at UU youth conferences, and with full force the new feminism soon after at SKSM, the Unitarian seminary. Inclusive language has become standard practice throughout the respectable English-speaking world, and woman are steadily taking their rightful place everywhere.

Since the 1920s we were among the first to support the Civil Rights Movement and its antecedents. In the 60s, several Unitarians were martyred, including the Rev. James Reeb, who was clubbed to death in Selma.

We were the first and continue to be the leader in support of GLBT&Q (that is, all the sexual orientation and gender-identification minorities). Unitarian

minister Jim Stoll, of whom I will speak of Nov. 7th, was the first ordained minister of an established church in all of North America, and perhaps in all the world, to come out publicly as gay. Our Welcoming Congregations movement has been copied by other liberal and even not-so-liberal denominations.

We were early in support of the migrant farm workers, and the leadership of César Chavez. We continue to oppose the vilifying and scapegoating of undocumented (and documented) workers from Latin America.

We have been early supporters of the United Nations, civil liberties, disabled access, natural foods, environmental protection, conservation, and green alternatives. We were first to accord true respect for the opinion of youth.

If it's good for people or good for the Earth, we've been for it from the beginning.

Now we're thinking of tackling the bullying problem that is causing so many young people torment that ends in taking their own lives.

- **UUSC.** The Service Committee, modeled on the AFSC, has been active all over the globe with relief, medical, and peace efforts. The UUSC deserves its own Sunday, and will get it later this year.

#### **Coincidentally, Task 4 -- Denominational linkages**

We are asked to rethink our connections to the larger institution, and we have been. We use UUA-created curricula in the RE program. We are supplied by ministers ever more carefully vetted by the Department of Ministry. Our endowment is carefully and safely invested by the Denomination's finance department.

We can and should ask for more help to make us attractive to newcomers and prospective ministers.

The Department of Ministry has consultants available to advise us on how to best present a medium-size church like First Unitarian. We should use their expertise.

One example of available help that we're not using is the Wayside Pulpit program (show examples). We need a place to publicly display them.

[I conclude an anecdote about a typically unusual religious liberal.]

Today is Association Sunday. Not only here, but across the country congregations are thinking about these things – remembering our past, considering our present, imagining our future.

Our Universalist ancestor L. B. Fisher was once asked where the Universalists stood on some contentious point of theology. He famously replied, “We do not stand, sir. We move!” We have the opportunity – as individuals, as a congregation, as an Association of congregations – to continue that movement.

Please give generously to the health of our Association.

# Beliefs

There is no single unifying belief that all Unitarian Universalists (UUs) hold, aside from complete and responsible freedom of [speech](#), [thought](#), [belief](#), [faith](#), and [disposition](#). They believe that each person is free to search for his or her own personal truth on issues, such as the existence, nature, and [meaning of life](#), deities, [creation](#), and [afterlife](#). UUs can come from any religious background, and hold beliefs from a variety of [cultures](#) or [religions](#).

Concepts about [deity](#) are diverse among UUs. Some have no belief in any gods ([atheism](#)); others believe in many gods ([polytheism](#)). Some believe that the question of the existence of any god is most likely unascertainable or unknowable ([agnosticism](#)). Some believe that [God](#) is a metaphor for a transcendent reality. Some believe in a female god ([goddess](#)), a passive god ([Deism](#)), an [Abrahamic god](#), or a god manifested in nature or the universe ([pantheism](#)). Many UUs reject the idea of deities and instead speak of the "spirit of life" that binds all [life on earth](#). UUs support each person's search for truth and meaning in concepts of spirituality.

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## ***Seven Principles and Purposes***

Deliberately without an official creed or dogma (per the principle of freedom of thought), Unitarian Universalists instead typically agree with the [Principles and Purposes](#) *suggested* by the [Unitarian Universalist Association](#). As with most actions in Unitarian Universalism, these were created in committee, and affirmed democratically by a vote of member congregations, proportional to their membership, taken at an annual General Assembly (a meeting of delegates from member congregations). The full [Principles, Purposes and Sources](#) can be found in the article on the [Unitarian Universalist Association](#). The Principles are as follows:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for 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.[17]

Unitarian Universalism is often referred to by its members as a *living tradition*, and the principles and purposes have been modified over time to reflect changes in spiritual beliefs among the membership. Most recently, the last principle, adopted in 1985 and generally known as the *Seventh Principle*, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part", and a sixth source (adopted in 1995), "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" were added to explicitly include members with [Neopagan](#), [Native American](#), and [pantheist](#) spiritualities.[18] Unitarian Universalists tend to promote beliefs of a person that are based on their individual thoughts, and can range from a strict monotheistic belief to more of a philosophical view of things.

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## **Six Sources**

Unitarian Universalists place emphasis on spiritual growth and development. Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion. The Unitarian Universalist Association affirms seven principles:[19] The official statement of Unitarian Universalist principles describes the "sources" upon which current practice is based:[19]

- 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;
- [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.