

## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

### UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM FACT SHEET

**Founded/Created:** Two Christian denominations with religious traditions dating back 2,000 years to early Christianity consolidated in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In the United States, Unitarian thought arose within established churches in the late 1700s; the American Unitarian Association founded in 1825. Universalist thought arose in opposition to Calvinism in the 1700s; a regional group (the New England convention) organized and adopted a profession of beliefs in 1803.

**Adherents:** 800,000 worldwide

**Sources of Religious Authority:**

1. personal experience
2. words and deeds of prophetic people
3. wisdom from the world's religions
4. teachings from Jewish and Christian scripture
5. reason and the teachings of science
6. the natural world

**Prophets:** Many Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have contributed their prophetic voices to the shaping of their faith tradition and to issues facing the broader community and world.

**Symbol:** Flaming chalice

**Terms and Fundamental Precepts:**

*Human beings* - Every human being has worth and dignity. All people are deserving of love and compassion.

*God* - Unitarian Universalists have many different ideas about God. Some believe in God and others do not. Some use words like Nature, Love, Humanity, or Spirit of Life to name a force greater than themselves.

*Truth* - Truth is revealed in many different ways and there is always more truth to be found. Every person is responsible for seeking truth and meaning in life and for tending to their own spiritual journey.

*Community* - We are all connected to one another. Unitarian Universalists strive to build beloved communities of peace and justice in congregations and in the world.

*Nature* - We are part of the natural world. Our actions and choices should support the well being of all life that shares the interdependent web of life on earth.

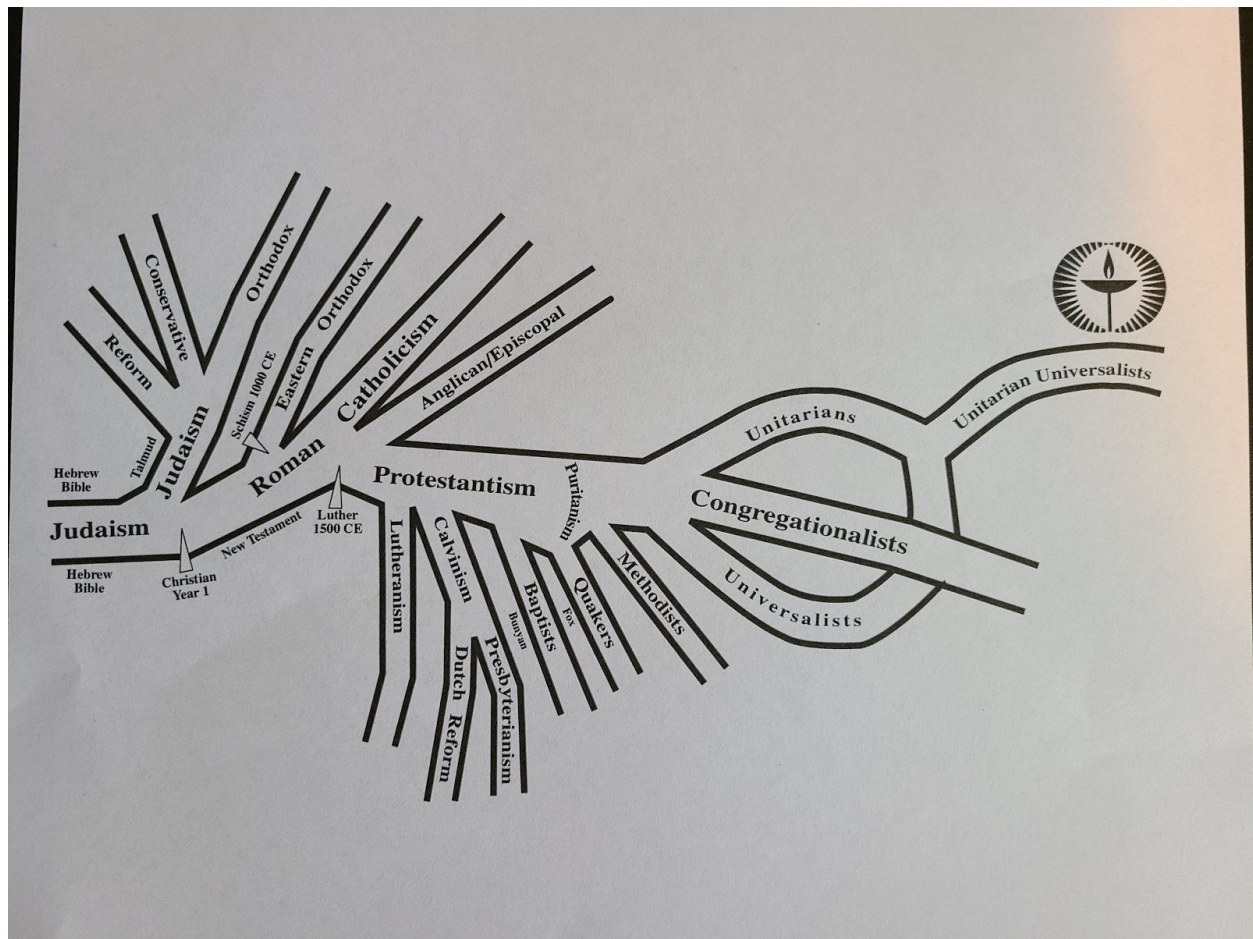
*Action* - Actions matter far more than belief. As Unitarian Thomas Jefferson said, "... it is in our lives and not from our words that our religion must be judged."

## History of Unitarian Universalism

Historically a **Unitarian** was someone who believed in the unity of God, rather than the Trinity (God in three parts, consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Historically, a **Universalist** was someone who believed in universal salvation, that no one will be condemned to hell.

See the picture below to see how it emerged from earlier religions.



In the three hundred or so years after Jesus lived and died, Christianity changed from a form of Judaism into a separate faith. During this time, people who lived in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea held many different ideas about the nature of Jesus, God, and humanity. We now recognize some of those ideas as early versions of Unitarianism and Universalism.

- Origen of Alexandria in Egypt, who is responsible for much of the Christian scripture, wrote in the third century that God loves everyone and all return to God after death, an early universalist position.
- In the fourth century, Arius, also of Alexandria, preached that God is one and Jesus was a holy man, an early Unitarian position.

Debates among Christians were fierce, and sometimes violent. In 325 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine brought church leaders together at Nicea, in Turkey, where **they agreed on a single**

**creed, or set of beliefs, to unify the empire. The Nicene Creed held that God was a trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both unitarianism and universalism were declared heresies, punishable by excommunication and even death.**

The heresies that are at the root of our contemporary Unitarian Universalism did not go away, but they did go underground for many centuries. In 1568, King John Sigismund of Transylvania became a Unitarian and made religious tolerance the law in his land. Unitarianism continues to thrive in this region today. Unitarian ideas cropped up in a number of places in Europe after the Protestant Reformation.

**In the British colonies in America (later the United States) unitarian and universalist ideas about God and humanity developed and spread during the eighteenth century. Unitarian ideas developed within other Protestant congregations, as ministers and lay people turned away from the Calvinist notion that humans are depraved and dependent upon God for salvation to embrace the idea that the way we behave on earth determines whether we go to heaven or hell. These liberal thinkers were called "Unitarian," which was intended to be insulting.**

**In 1819, William Ellery Channing embraced the label "Unitarian" in a famous sermon. Between 1825 and 1835, many New England congregations split, often with the Trinitarians withdrawing to start new congregations and leaving the buildings to the Unitarians. Within a decade, the Transcendentalists, a new group that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, criticized the Unitarian churches for being too "cold" and too orthodox. The Transcendentalists preferred a spirituality that nurtured a connection with the natural world.**

**Universalist ideas were also a rejection of Calvinism, but universalism developed outside of established congregations. Missionaries spread the universalist message. Christian churches sprang up with the message that God's love is for everyone, no exceptions. Universalists rejected the idea that God would condemn some people to hell. George de Benneville and John Murray were early Universalists, both coming to America from Europe in the 1700s. De Benneville spread the Universalist faith in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, while Murray preached primarily in New England. In 1805, itinerant preacher Hosea Ballou published A Treatise on Atonement, which explained Universalist ideas. The faith grew rapidly, especially where people's lives were difficult. Its news was joyful and hopeful, offering God's unconditional love to everyone.**

**In the 19th century, Unitarians and Universalists created structures to organize their respective denominations. Their statements of faith or belief emphasized different purposes and beliefs, and the two groups saw themselves as quite different from one another. But they shared important values, which made it possible for them to merge several generations later. Both Unitarians and Universalists believed in the freedom to think for oneself and valued individual conscience over a shared creed. Many ministers from both groups embraced Darwin's theory of evolution after it was published in 1860 and moved away from believing the Bible to be literally true in every word.**

Many Unitarians and Universalists believed in creating the Kingdom of God on earth, working to provide help for poor people, immigrants, mentally ill people, and others on the margins, as well as working tirelessly for the abolition of slavery, and then for women's suffrage. In both religions, women were especially active in providing help and working for a better society; Universalism was the first Christian faith in the U.S. to ordain women as ministers. By 1933, many Unitarians and Universalists had embraced the idea of humanism. They signed the Humanist Manifesto, which said that human beings, and not God, have the responsibility and the challenge to make the world a better place. Unitarian congregations in particular became home to both liberal Christians and those who called themselves religious humanists. Universalism remained largely a liberal Christian movement in the first half of the 20th century.

But something was stirring in the children's programs in both denominations. New discoveries in progressive education and an embrace of the teachings of science and reason alongside traditional Christian teachings led to a new way of teaching children. Angus MacLean, a Universalist, advocated for active, hands-on learning about the world in religious education classes. Sophia Lyon Fahs, a Unitarian, oversaw the development of new Sunday school materials that embraced stories from all over the world as well as understandings from science. Universalists began using the Unitarian materials in their religious education classrooms, and a generation of Unitarians and Universalists grew up learning about their faith the same way and hearing the same stories.

**By the late 1950s, the two denominations began to talk about merger. In 1961, the Unitarian Universalist Association was born from a consolidation of the two. Over the next few years, the Principles and Sources were adopted. By the late 1980s, the flaming chalice, originally the symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee, came into wide use in our congregations as a symbol of our faith. In 2011, the Unitarian Universalist Association celebrated the 50th anniversary of consolidation by remembering the deep and long heritage from both of its parent traditions and by reflecting on the shared journey of its first fifty years.**

Some things to think about...

- Over time, Universalists and Unitarians often worked together on matters of justice, such as civil rights for African Americans, equal rights for women, and objection to war. They realized they held many beliefs in common and decided to merge. Were you surprised by our Christian roots?
- Is it important to know our religion's history? Why or why not?
- Unitarian Universalism is strongest in the United States where it developed into its present organization, but there are Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in other countries. What do you know about expressions of our faith in other parts of the world?

## THE UU PRINCIPLES

There are seven Principles which Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Some things to think about...

- Many UUs, including adults, cannot name all seven principles. Why do you think that is so?
- Do you believe in all the Principles?
- Which ones are you living most fully? Which do you pay little or no attention to?
- Is there a relationship between the ones you remembered and the ones you live?
- Can we live them if we do not know what they are?

In many religions, people are asked to memorize the most important beliefs or understandings. Examples from Christianity include The Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith used in both Catholic and Protestant churches. Ask:

- Is there value in requiring some things to be memorized? What would be the benefit?
- Would it strengthen Unitarian Universalism if all UUs knew the seven Principles by heart

## VIRTUAL VISIT

Typically, Building Bridges' participants visit King's Chapel in Boston. King's Chapel is an independent Christian **unitarian** congregation affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association that is "unitarian Christian in theology, Anglican in worship, and congregational in governance". Because of its Christian theology, it is a different experience than attending a UU service at First Church in Belmont. (Although it is similar in many of its social justice beliefs and how the church is run). The church has a long history in Boston (in 1686 it opened as an Anglican church).

To observe a virtual service: <http://www.kings-chapel.org/past-virtual-services.html>

## EXPLORE THE TOPIC FURTHER....

- View this video on the history of UUism:  
<https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/history>
- Are you on social media? Search for UU groups you find interesting.
- Ask a parent or another adult you know in our congregation about their history with Unitarian Universalism. If they came from another faith, how did they learn about Unitarian Universalism? What attracted them to it? If they grew up UU, have they ever considered changing their affiliation? How do they feel Unitarian Universalism has

- accompanied them on their spiritual journey?
- Some things to think about...
    - How has my relationship with Unitarian Universalism changed over time?
    - Where do I hope my faith will take me?
  - The website 42explore has activities for all ages on more than 200 themes, including world religions (at <http://www.42explore2.com/religion.htm>).
  - Take the BeliefNet questionnaire (at <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/quizzes/beliefomatic.aspx>)
    - Personal religious beliefs are more detailed and complex than any multiple choice questionnaire can capture, and your beliefs may change over time, but this is a fun way to start exploring your beliefs and other religions.

**SOURCE:**

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This program and additional resources are available on the UUA.org web site at [www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith..](http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith..)