

Unitarian Universalism

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History, FAQ, and Clarifications

(Borrowed heavily from Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, "Frequently Asked Questions" Pamphlet)

History - Who are the Unitarian Universalists? In the first centuries of the Christian era, Christians held a variety of beliefs concerning the nature of Jesus. In 325 CE, however, the Council of Nicea promulgated the doctrine of the Trinity-God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost-and denounced all those who believed differently as heretics.

In the sixteenth century, Christian humanists in Central Europe-in Poland and Transylvania-studied the Bible closely. They could not find the orthodox dogma of the Trinity in the texts. Therefore, they affirmed-as did Jesus, according to the Gospels-the unity, or oneness, of God. Hence they acquired the name *Unitarian*.

These sixteenth-century Unitarians preached and organized churches according to their own rational convictions in the face of overwhelming orthodox opposition and persecution. They also advocated religious freedom for others. In Transylvania, now part of Romania, Unitarians persuaded the Diet (legislature) to pass the Edict of Toleration. In 1568 the law declared that, since "faith is the gift of God," people would not be forced to adhere to a faith they did not choose.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, radical reformers in Europe and America also studied the Bible closely. They found only a few references to hell, which they believed orthodox Christians had grossly misinterpreted. They found, both in the Bible and in their own hearts, an unconditionally loving God. They believed that God would not deem any human being unworthy of divine love, and that salvation was for all. Because of this emphasis on universal salvation, they called themselves *Universalists*.

In the eighteenth century, a dogmatic Calvinist insistence on predestination and human depravity seemed to liberal Christians irrational, perverse, and contrary to both biblical tradition and immediate experience. Liberal Christians believe that human beings are free to heed an inner summons of conscience and character. To deny human freedom is to make God a tyrant and to undermine God-given human dignity.

In continuity with our sixteenth-century Unitarian forebears, *today we Unitarian Universalists are determined to follow our own reasoned convictions, no matter what others may say, and we embrace tolerance as a central principle, inside and outside our own churches.*

Frequently Asked Questions:

How did the movement come to have such a long name? In North America, Unitarianism and Universalism developed separately. Universalist congregations began to be established in the 1770s. Other congregations, many established earlier, began to take the Unitarian name in the 1820s. Over the decades the two groups converged in their liberal emphasis and style, and in 1961 they merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Where are the Unitarian Universalists? More than one thousand congregations in the United States and Canada belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) of Congregations, with headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts.

The oldest Unitarian congregations are in Romania. There are large Unitarian congregations in the Khasi Hills of India. Others are found in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, France, Great Britain, Australia, Nigeria, South Africa, the Philippines, and Japan. (Some of these are Unitarian and some are Universalist.)

North American Unitarian Universalists maintain ties with other Unitarian Universalists throughout the world, mostly through our membership in the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), organized in

1900. Members of the IARF include other liberal Christian groups as well as Humanist, Hindu Reform, Shinto, and Buddhist groups.

What do UUs believe about God? Some Unitarian Universalists are nontheists and do not find language about God useful. The faith of other Unitarian Universalists in God may be profound, though among these, too, talk of God has its own flavor. Why?

Forrest Church a Unitarian Universalist theologian and minister who does believe in God was once told by a man he had met: "I don't believe in God." Rev. Church responded: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in, it is likely I don't believe in that God either, but I do believe in God.

The word God is much Constrained by the loudest theological voices. Far too often, the word seems to refer to a kind of granddaddy in the sky or a super magician. To avoid confusion, many Unitarian Universalists are more apt to speak of "reverence for life" (in the words of Albert Schweitzer, a Unitarian), the spirit of love or truth, the holy, or the gracious. They might also speak of "the God of many names, known in many ways that leads us to truth and reminds us of our purpose." Many also prefer such language because it is inclusive; it can be used with integrity by theist and nontheist members alike.

Whatever our theological persuasion, Unitarian Universalists generally agree that the fruits of religious belief matter more than beliefs about religion-even about God. So we usually speak more of the fruits: gratitude for blessings, worthy aspirations, the renewal of hope, being held in times of need, and service on behalf of justice.

What about Jesus? Classically, Unitarian Universalist Christians have understood Jesus as a savior because he was a God-filled human being, not a supernatural being. He was, and still is for many UUs, an exemplar, one who has shown the way of redemptive love, in whose spirit anyone may live generously and abundantly. Among us, Jesus' very human life and teaching have been understood as products of, and in line with, the great Jewish tradition of prophets and teachers. He neither broke with that tradition nor superceded it.

What do Unitarian Universalists believe about heaven and hell? Some believe in heaven. Few probably believe in hell except for the hell that people create for themselves. Some UUs believe in reincarnation, and some believe there is no afterlife.

Do Unitarian Universalists pray? Some of us pray; others meditate or just think things through.

Is Unitarian Universalism a real religion? It is not, if you believe religion is about dividing people between the saved and unsaved. However, if you believe that religion should seek to unite humanity rather than divide it, we are a very real religion.

How do Unitarian Universalist ministers prepare for their profession? Typically, UU ministers earn a master's degree in divinity, serve as a pastoral care councilor in a hospital or prison for three months, serve as an intern minister for 10 months, and interview with the denomination's Ministerial Fellowship Committee to be eligible to serve our congregations.

Clarification: Commonly Confused with other Uni' Churches: Unitarian Universalism is not the same, nor does it employ a similar approach to religion as 1. The Unity Church, 2. The Unification Church, or 3. The Universal Life Church