



“Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism”

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For Religion Compass

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious tradition that took its present denominational form in 1961 through the consolidation of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association, founded respectively in 1793 and 1825. Both Universalism and Unitarianism were originally forms of “liberal” or “rational” Christianity that defined themselves in opposition to Calvinist orthodoxy and revivalist enthusiasm. The former was named for its affirmation that all human beings will achieve salvation; the latter for its rejection of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Both gradually opened themselves to various forms of post-Christian faith, to the point that only a minority of Unitarian Universalists today identify as Christians. Unitarian Universalism’s fervent opposition to “creeds” has made room for Buddhists, Jews, pagans, freewheeling mystics, “process theists” in the tradition of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, “religious naturalists” influenced by Henry Nelson Wieman, and “humanists” who find religious value in humanity itself but not in God or the supernatural. Unitarian Universalists are united by a system of congregational polity that dates back to the Cambridge Platform of 1648 and by a list of seven principles and six sources that guides communal decisionmaking but is not binding on individuals. Most Unitarian Universalists are highly educated and hold liberal or leftist views on sociopolitical issues; most also yearn to build a “beloved community” that transcends divisions of race and class.

The 1000 congregations, 161,000 adult members, and 54,000 children who comprise the Unitarian Universalist Association reside primarily in the United States of America, though thirty congregations (totaling 2000 members) in the Philippines are treated as a single member congregation of the UUA. The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists comprises seventeen full members, the largest of which are the UUA, the Unitarian Church of Transylvania (60,000 members), the Unitarian Church in Hungary (25,000 members), the Khasi Unitarian Union in India (9000 members), the Canadian Unitarian Council (5150 members), and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Churches in Great Britain (4300 members). The International Association for Religious Freedom (formerly the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers) includes liberal groups rooted in many world faiths, notably the Brahmo Samaj of India.

A brief overview of Unitarian Universalism that treats history, theology, worship, religious education, and other topics is the *Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, which is edited anew by each denominational president (Morales 2012). Greenwood and Harris (2011) provide somewhat more detail, with particular emphasis on global dimensions of the tradition. Leitgeb (2009) is an ethnographic study emphasizing practices of “self-cultivation.” Harris (2004) is a historical dictionary. The standard historical overview is Robinson (1985), though several

surveys treating either Unitarianism or Universalism alone are still in use (Miller 1979, Miller 1985, Wright 1989a, Wilbur 1952). Recent topical histories with a broad chronological scope address such topics as community ministry, socioeconomic class, and Unitarianism and Universalism in Canada (Parker 2007, Harris 2011, Horton 2011, Buehrens 2011, Bumbaugh 2000). Cordes (2011-) is a series of documentaries with strong emphasis on global Unitarianism and Universalism. There is no comprehensive collection of primary sources, but useful anthologies are available on such topics as the origins of Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and women's work for social reform (Ahlstrom and Carey 1985, Buell 2006, Myerson 2000, Emerson 2000). Cassara (1997) and Parke (1985) are anthologies of Universalist and Unitarian sources, respectively, first published on the eve of consolidation.

Scholars and church leaders have debated the origins of Unitarianism for several generations. Some Unitarian Universalists point to Arius and Origen as the progenitors of the "unitarian" and "universalist" ideas, though those patristic theologians had no direct influence on the founding of the denominations. There is sharp disagreement about the degree to which American Unitarianism built on the legacy of Polish Socinianism, Transylvanian Unitarianism, and the British Unitarian tradition of Joseph Priestley and Theophilus Lindsay. Earl Morse Wilbur (1952) gave significant attention to all these antecedents. Conrad Wright (1955) offered an alternative narrative: for him, Unitarianism was an indigenous American tradition that emerged gradually among Harvard-educated Puritans who absorbed Enlightenment ideas over the course of the eighteenth-century, then broke sharply with more "orthodox" Congregationalists during the "Unitarian controversy" of 1805-1825. With their Puritan roots, these Unitarians had little in common with the Polish and Transylvanian churches that traced their ancestry to the Radical Reformation. Wright's emphasis on indigeneity is echoed in Conkin (1997). The most interesting recent contribution to this debate is Bowers (2007). Largely conceding Wright's interpretation of Unitarian churches in Massachusetts, Bowers demonstrates that Wright neglected a more scattered network of congregations (including a few in New England) that drew inspiration directly from Priestley, both before and after his immigration to Pennsylvania in 1794. Ruffin's (2008) biography of Salem minister William Bentley sheds important light on the intersection between the two strands of Unitarianism. Johnson (2008) and Reed (2011) highlight Unitarian contributions to science from Priestley to Darwin. Other valuable studies of first generation Unitarianism in America include biographies of the preeminent preacher William Ellery Channing (Mendelsohn 1971, Delbanco 1981), Daniel Walker Howe's (1970) influential study of Harvard moral philosophy, and recent dissertations on the Ware family, biblical scholarship, and responses to poverty (Jensen 2001, Willsky 2012, Posey 2007).

The origins of American Universalism are more difficult to trace. Among the eighteenth-century expounders of the idea of universal salvation in North America were Charles Chauncy, the highly respectable minister of First Church in Boston (and a major precursor to Massachusetts Unitarianism) and George de Benneville, a visionary and physician who was part

of the pietist influx into Pennsylvania. The first explicitly Universalist congregation was organized by English immigrant John Murray, who along with his teacher James Rely had previously affiliated with the revivalism of George Whitefield. By 1800, however, most Universalists, including the preeminent leader Hosea Ballou, had roots in the Baptist tradition of rural New England. Connections between Baptists and Universalists are highlighted in Marini (1982) and Hughes (1997 and 2005). To complicate matters still further, Ballou rejected the doctrine of the Trinity on the grounds articulated by Joseph Priestley, which made him an earlier and more radical “unitarian” than most Boston Unitarians. Yet Ann Lee Bressler (2001) warns against the tendency to conflate early Universalism with Unitarianism: Universalism began, she insists, as “an eschatological and communally oriented faith” (p.8) and experienced a nearly total transformation before folding into a liberal consensus. Skemp (2009) is the first scholarly biography of pioneering women’s rights advocate Judith Sargent Murray, who married John Murray; apart from this there have been few major biographies of early Universalists since Ernest Cassara’s (1982) study of Hosea Ballou.

Universalism and Unitarianism were scarcely established when they were wracked by divisions. In 1817 a playful debate on whether salvation occurred instantaneously or gradually after death devolved into a schism between “ultra-Universalists” and “restorationists.” In the 1820s, several of the most talented Universalist ministers defected to the anticlerical Freethought movement of Frances Wright and Robert Owen. Two decades later, the emerging Spiritualist movement gained the loyalties of as many as half of all Universalist ministers. Some stayed within the denominational fold, but those who gave spirit messages an authority comparable to that of the Bible were forced out. The link between Universalism and Spiritualism is highlighted in most general studies of Spiritualism, and given sustained attention in Buescher (2004 and 2006). Among the more prominent Universalists turned Spiritualists were prison reformer John Murray Spear, pacifist theoretician Adin Ballou (Spann 1992), and visionary poet Thomas Lake Harris; all of these men were also founders of utopian communities.

The Unitarians, meanwhile, were challenged by the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. In the 1838 Divinity School Address, Emerson, who had recently left the Unitarian ministry, urged Divinity School graduates to turn their attention away from “historical Christianity” and “acquaint men at first hand with Deity.” When Unitarian leaders Andrews Norton and Henry Ware, Jr., attacked Emerson for abandoning miracles, biblical authority, and a personal God, George Ripley entered the lists on Emerson’s behalf—then resigned his ministry to launch a utopian community at Brook Farm. Their friend Theodore Parker, on the other hand, insisted on retaining his ministry—prompting most other Unitarian ministers to refuse to exchange pulpits with him. Though Transcendentalism involved far fewer people than Spiritualism, it has inspired vastly more scholarship. Indeed, scholarship on Transcendentalism is more voluminous than that on all other aspects of Unitarian Universalism combined. This is largely because Emerson and his admirers figure so prominently in the canon of American literature. Most of the scholarship has been generated by English or history, rather

than religion, departments, though several of the leading scholars have personal ties to Unitarian Universalism (Buell 1973, 1995, 2003; Gura 2007; Richardson 1995; Robinson, 1982, 1993, 2004; Capper & Wright 1999; Rosecrans 2000). The past two decades have seen a great flowering of Transcendentalist biography (Capper 1992-2007; Grodzins 2002; LeBeau 1985; Marshall 2005; Matteson 2007, 2012; von Mehren 1994), as well as comprehensive studies of the utopian communities at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Northampton (Delano 2004; Francis 2010; Clark 1995). Both Transcendentalism and more conservative strands of Unitarianism figure prominently in the equally voluminous scholarship on abolitionism (McKanan 2003; Stange 1977, 1984; Yacovone 1991). Macauley (2001) offers an important counterpoint, narrating the experiences of Unitarianism in the antebellum South.

Like many American traditions, Unitarianism and Universalism evolved bureaucratic denominational structures in the years after the Civil War. Unitarianism in particular enjoyed strong leaders with close ties to structures of political and cultural power. Unitarian Horace Mann was the most important shaper of American public education, and Unitarians founded Washington University in Saint Louis, Reed College in Oregon, Antioch College in Ohio, and other leading schools. Thomas Starr King, a Universalist turned Unitarian who pastored the Unitarian congregation in San Francisco, played the decisive role in keeping California loyal to the Union (Matthews 2012). Henry Whitney Bellows led the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, inadvertently creating space for future women's suffrage advocates to gain organizational skills (Giesberg 2000, Venet 2005). After the war, Bellows organized the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, bringing local congregations into organic union for the first time. Working closely with moderate Transcendentalists James Freeman Clarke and Frederic Henry Hedge, Bellows promoted a vision of a "Broad Church" with room for both Christians and post-Christians (Kring 1979). Though the radicals formed a rival "Free Religious Association" in the postbellum period, many were eventually reconciled to Bellows's vision. With weaker leaders, Universalism was less successful at retaining its radicals; it also struggled to differentiate itself from mainline Protestant churches that were no longer preaching hellfire. Though the "grasshopper missionary" Quillen Shinn planted dozens of churches, the denomination as a whole declined steadily from the Civil War to its consolidation with Unitarianism.

Recent scholarship on the postbellum period has generally downplayed institutional history in favor of studies of theology and social activism on the radical fringe. Leigh Schmidt's (2005) study of American spirituality focuses largely on the second-generation Transcendentalists of the Free Religious Association, while his (2010) biography of sex radical Ida C. Craddock notes her Unitarian affiliation. Emily Mace (2010) highlights radical Unitarian as well as Ethical Culturist contributions to a "cosmopolitan" engagement with the religions of the world. Both Unitarianism and Universalism were relatively open to women's ministry in the late nineteenth century, with Universalism producing the largest number of ordained women and Unitarianism inspiring an especially close-knit network of female pastors in Iowa (Cazden 1983;

Coté 1988; Tucker 1994; Zink-Sawyer 2003). Laywomen in both traditions were also prominent in women's rights and other forms of activism (Tucker 2010, Galliher 2009, Venet 2005).

Twentieth-century Unitarianism and Universalism have gained modest scholarly attention, with the emphasis on social activism and theological radicalism continuing. Despite their exclusion from the Federal Council of Churches, Unitarians and Universalists (such as Harvard professor Francis Greenwood Peabody and Tufts scholar Orello Cone) contributed substantially to the mainstream of the Social Gospel. They were also overrepresented in more radical movements, including socialism, World War I pacifism, the early civil rights activism of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and even the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s (McKanan 2011; Eddis 2011, Lee-Forman 1998). African American ministers in the traditions, though numerically few, are the topic of several studies (Morrison-Reed 1984, 2011; Floyd-Thomas 2008). Unitarian and Universalist religious educators, led by the prolific Sophia Lyon Fahs, led the way in incorporating Deweyan method and multi-religious content into Sunday School curricula. And the most momentous theological event of the period was the rise of "religious humanism," which sought to foster religious values apart from any notion of the divine (Schulz 2002). The conflict generated by such ideas was surprisingly mild: Unitarian leader Frederick May Eliot successfully expanded Bellows's big tent to include atheists as well as theists, and by the time of consolidation humanism was the dominant strand within Unitarianism and a significant minority within Universalism.

Consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist traditions occurred at a time of optimism among Unitarians, who had seen more rapid growth in the postwar years than their mainline Protestant neighbors (Ross 2001). Partly this was because of the innovative "Fellowship" movement, which encouraged the creation of lay-led congregations in cities and university towns far removed from denominational heartland of New England (Ulbrich 2008). Many of the newer Unitarians saw social justice as the heart of their faith. Members of the fellowship in Montgomery, Alabama, were prominent as white allies of the bus boycott in that city. In 1965 dozens of ministers travelled to Selma in the wake of the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, and hundreds more joined them after one of their own, Rev. James Reeb, was murdered on March 9. (Another Unitarian Universalist, Viola Liuzzo, was killed in Selma on March 25.) (Mendelsohn 1966) Membership in UU churches was still overwhelmingly white, however, and when Black Unitarian Universalists organized a caucus, the national response was ambivalent. The UU general assembly voted in 1968 to give a million dollars, spread over four years, to black empowerment activities—perhaps the largest per capita contribution of any historically white denomination. The grant was reaffirmed in 1969, then scaled back by the national officers in response to a fiscal crisis. This history continues to shape denominational conversations about racial justice. (Carpenter 2003)

The Unitarian Universalist embrace of feminism and GLBT liberation generated less controversy; indeed, one of the most notable differences between Unitarian Universalism and mainline Protestantism is the absence of any schism-threatening battle over sexuality. During the

1970s the denomination moved rapidly to embrace inclusive language, and soon most Unitarian Universalist ministers were women. Drawing on a long heritage of support for birth control, Unitarian Universalism repeatedly advocated for abortion rights. A few ministers had performed gay and lesbian marriages long before Stonewall, a few came out of the closet around that time, and the denomination declared its solidarity with gay liberation in 1970 (Wilson 2012, Oppenheimer 2003, McKanan 2011: 234-35). Unitarian Universalists also pioneered religiously-based sex education with “About Your Sexuality,” a 1970 curriculum that empowered children to make thoughtful choices about their sexual behavior (Gibb 2003). (Its successor, “Our Whole Lives,” was developed jointly with the United Church of Christ.) Considerably more disruptive consequences flowed from the sexual revolution, however: the denomination experienced a wave of clergy sexual misconduct as heterosexual male ministers experimented with alternatives to monogamy in the 1970s (Pope-Lance 2011). Coupled with the defections of politically conservative members, this turmoil contributed to steady numerical decline from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Since that point, however, Unitarian Universalism has enjoyed steady or slightly increasing membership numbers, with growth especially strong in regions that had once had few or no Unitarian or Universalist congregations. The majority of Unitarian Universalists today are converts.

Though there are no issues that threaten to divide Unitarian Universalism today, there are lively conversations about the proper balance between social justice work and other dimensions of religious life, and about the most transformative and faithful ways to pursue social justice (Millspaugh 2009). Efforts to become more fully anti-racist in congregational and denominational practice have generated widespread reflection (Bowens-Wheatley and Jones 2002; Takahashi-Morris, Roush, and Spencer 2009). With the numerical decline of the humanist strand of Unitarian Universalist, and the proliferation of spiritual paths within the denomination, Unitarian Universalists often debate the proper role of “spirituality” within liberal religion. Denominational president William Sinkford set off one such debate in 2003, when he called on Unitarian Universalists to “grow out of a cranky and contentious adolescence” by becoming more willing to use traditional religious language (Grodzins 2004).

Despite its aversion to creeds and formal doctrines, Unitarian Universalism has always been well represented in North American theological conversations. At the time of consolidation, three UU scholars enjoyed influence far beyond the bounds of the denomination. James Luther Adams, a social ethicist who taught at Meadville Lombard, Harvard, and Andover Newton, helped introduce Paul Tillich to American audiences; absorbed neo-orthodox critiques without betraying liberal principles; and was among the older generation of theologians who welcomed the onset of liberation theology. Henry Nelson Wieman and Charles Hartshorne were philosophers who joined Unitarian churches near the end of their careers; as influential shapers of “Chicago School” theology they introduced the thought of Alfred North Whitehead to American theologians. Adams’s legacy has been continued by his student Kim Beach (Beach

2005); Wieman's by Jerome Stone (2008) and Creighton Peden (2010); and Hartshorne's by a vast number of disciples, both in the academy and the churches.

Most UU theologians today identify simultaneously with liberation theology and with the older traditions of humanism, religious naturalism, process theism, or Christian liberalism. Building on the pioneering work of William Jones, Anthony Pinn has emerged as the preeminent exponent of Black humanism (1995, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2010, 2012). Sharon Welch, who came to Unitarian Universalism through her encounters with students preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry at Harvard Divinity School, offers a liberationist humanism in a postmodern key (1990, 1999, 2004, 2008), while William Murry's work (2007) reinterprets classical humanism in a twenty-first century context. Rebecca Parker, working in collaboration with Rita Nakashima Brock and John Buehrens, has offered a thoroughgoing feminist critique of classical Christianity while also inviting post-Christian Unitarian Universalists to engage the Christian theological tradition more fully (Parker and Brock 2001; Parker and Brock 2008; Buehrens and Parker 2010). Thandeka, who like Parker draws deeply on the tradition of process theology, has addressed both the legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher and the psychology of racism (1995), and is currently developing a systematic theology in dialogue with cognitive neuroscience. Paul Razor's overview of liberal theology and his call to renewed prophetic practice among religious liberals have been widely read by Unitarian Universalist laypeople as well as scholars (2005, 2012).

Though UU theologians are well represented in the academy, theological labor in UUism never fully migrated out of the congregational setting. Like William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou in the early nineteenth century, and John Haynes Holmes, John Dietrich, and Curtis Reese in the early twentieth century, many of the most influential thinkers today have combined serious scholarship with careers entirely or primarily in the parish, or in denominational leadership (Buehrens 2003, Church 2009, Schulz 2001, Pearson 2006, Bumbaugh 2000, Morrison-Reed 1984, 2001, Bowens-Wheatley and Jones 2002, Gilbert 2000).

Fewer than one in a thousand Americans are members of Unitarian Universalist churches today. Still, the tradition has not lost faith in its own capacity to be "the religion for our time," as current denominational president Peter Morales puts it. That vision is most evident in the "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign, which strives to give a rich theological grounding to activism, particularly on the issues of marriage equality and immigration rights. At the 2012 General Assembly in Phoenix, delegates joined with local partners to protest Arizona's S.B. 1070 law and the harsh policies of the Maricopa County sheriff's office. It is unlikely that the witness of two thousand Unitarian Universalists directly influenced the Supreme Court's decision to overturn most of that law. But the action epitomized the vision that most unites Unitarian Universalists: a profound longing to embody "beloved community" in the local congregation and the larger society.

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