

Our Unitarian Universalist Faith: Frequently Asked Questions

by Alice Blair Wesley

At a Unitarian Universalist worship service or meeting, you are likely to find members whose positions on faith may be derived from a variety of religious beliefs: Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, naturist, atheist, or agnostic. Members might tell you that they are religious humanists, liberal Christians, or world religionists.

All these people, and others who label their beliefs still differently, are faithful Unitarian Universalists committed to the practice of free religion. We worship, sing, play, study, teach, and work for social justice together as congregations-all the while remaining strong in our individual convictions.

If Unitarian Universalists hold such varied convictions, what does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?

Who are Unitarian Universalists?

We are a religious people who have woven strands of a rich past into a tapestry of the present.

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.*

Also during the seventeenth century, reformers in several European countries, especially in England, could not find a biblical basis for the authority and power of ecclesiastical bishops. They affirmed, therefore, the authority and power of the Holy Spirit to guide the local members. These reformers on the radical left wing of the Reformation, seeking to "purify" the church of its "corruptions," reclaimed what they believed to be ancient church practice and named it *congregational polity*.

These same seventeenth-century radicals did away with creeds, that is, with precisely phrased statements of belief to which members had to subscribe. Members joining their churches signed a simple and broadly phrased covenant, or agreement, such as this one: "We pledge to walk together in the ways of the Lord as it pleaseth Him to make them known to us, now and in days to come."

Some of these reformers, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, crossed the Atlantic and braved the North American wilderness to establish covenanted congregations whose direction belonged to the local members. Some of these original congregational churches developed increasingly liberal theological beliefs after 1750, and in the early nineteenth century, many of them added the word *Unitarian* to their names. Thus, some of the oldest churches in the United States, including the First Parish of Plymouth, Massachusetts, became Unitarian. In the late eighteenth century, other radicals who believed in religious liberty and universal salvation organized separate Universalist congregations.

In continuity with our independent forebears, *today Unitarian Universalist congregations are covenanted, not creedal. Congregational polity is a basic doctrine. In the spirit of freedom, we cherish honest dialogue and persuasion, not coercion. We embrace democratic method as a central principle. Our local members unite to engage in and to support ministries of their own choosing.*

The seventeenth-century scientific revolution began a great shift in Western thinking. In the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment brought an increased willingness to look critically and analytically at all human institutions, without presupposing the sanctity or privilege of any.

Many religious groups fiercely resisted these scientific analytical ideas. Some still do. In the churches of our forebears, new scientific and social ideas—from Newtonian physics, to evolution, to psychology, to relativity—found ready acceptance. Indeed, some of the greatest scientists and social theorists of the age were either privately or publicly Unitarian or Universalist: Joseph Priestley, Charles Darwin, Maria Mitchell, and Benjamin Rush, for example.

In the nineteenth century, increased travel and translation of Eastern religious texts brought greater awareness of different religions. Again, many of our forebears were uncommonly open to new ideas from Eastern cultures. Ralph Waldo Emerson was deeply influenced by Hinduism, and James Freeman Clarke was among the first in the world to urge and teach the study of comparative religion.

In continuity with our forebears, *today Unitarian Universalists expect new scientific disclosures to cohere, not conflict, with our religious faith. We embrace the challenge and the joy of intercultural religious fellowship.*

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 can one find Unitarian Universalist congregations now?

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 may be restrained. Why?

The word God is much abused. 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. Many also prefer such language because it is inclusive; it is used with integrity by theist and nontheist members.

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, 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.

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Many of us honor Jesus, and many of us honor other master teachers of past or present generations, like Moses or the Buddha. As a result, mixed-tradition families may find common ground in the UU fellowship without compromising other loyalties.

And about the Bible?

In most of our congregations, our children learn Bible stories as a part of their church school curricula. It is not unusual to find adult study groups in the churches, or in workshops at summer camps and conferences, focusing on the Bible. Allusions to biblical symbols and events are frequent in our sermons. In most of our congregations, the Bible is read as any other sacred text might be—from time to time, but not routinely.

We have especially cherished the prophetic books of the Bible. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and other prophets dared to speak critical words of love to the powerful, calling for justice for the oppressed. Many Unitarian and Universalist social reformers have been inspired by the biblical prophets. We hallow the names of Unitarian and Universalist prophets: Joseph Tuckerman, Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, Theodore Parker, Susan B. Anthony, and many others.

We do not, however, hold the Bible—or any other account of human experience—to be either an infallible guide or the exclusive source of truth. Much biblical material is mythical or legendary. Not that it should be discarded for that reason! Rather, it should be treasured for what it is. We believe that we should read the Bible as we read other books (or the newspaper)—with imagination and a critical eye.

We also respect the sacred literature of other religions. Contemporary works of science, art, and social commentary are valued as well. We hold, in the words of an old liberal formulation, that "revelation is not sealed." Unitarian Universalists aspire to truth as wide as the world—we look to find truth anywhere, universally.

How do UUs understand salvation?

The English word *salvation* derives from the Latin *salus*, meaning health. Unitarian Universalists are as concerned with salvation, in the sense of spiritual health or wholeness, as any other religious people.

However, in many Western churches, salvation has come to be associated with a specific set of beliefs or a spiritual transformation of a very limited type.

Among Unitarian Universalists, instead of salvation you will hear of our yearning for, and our experience of, personal growth, increased wisdom, strength of character, and gifts of insight, understanding, inner and outer peace, courage, patience, and compassion. The ways in which these things come to, change, and heal us, are many indeed. We seek and celebrate them in our worship.

What ceremonies are observed, what holidays celebrated?

Our ceremonies-of marriage and starting a new family, naming or dedicating our children, and memorializing our dead-are phrased in simple, contemporary language. We observe these rites in community, not because they are required by some rule or dogma, but because in them we may voice our affection, hopes, and dedication.

Though practices vary in our congregations and change over time, UUs celebrate many of the great religious holidays with enthusiasm. Whether we gather to celebrate Christmas, Passover, or the Hindu holiday Divali, we do so in a universal context, recognizing and honoring religious observances and festivals as innate and needful in all human cultures.

Are Unitarian Universalists Christian?

Yes and no.

Yes, some Unitarian Universalists are Christian. Personal encounter with the spirit of Jesus as the christ richly informs their religious lives.

No, Unitarian Universalists are not Christian, if by *Christian* you mean those who think that acceptance of any creedal belief whatsoever is necessary for salvation. Unitarian Universalist Christians are considered heretics by those orthodox Christians who claim none but Christians are "saved." (Fortunately, not all the orthodox make that claim.)

Yes, Unitarian Universalists are Christian in the sense that both Unitarian and Universalist history are part of Christian history. Our core principles and practices were first articulated and established by liberal Christians.

Some Unitarian Universalists are not Christian. For though they may acknowledge the Christian history of our faith, Christian stories and symbols are no longer primary for them. They draw their personal faith from many sources: nature, intuition, other cultures, science, civil liberation movements, and so on.

How is religious education conducted?

The program of religious education is determined, as are all other programs, by members of the local congregation. A wide range of courses is available through our Association. These are adapted by members as they choose. Courses appropriate for children may be offered in subjects as varied as interpersonal relations, ethical questions, the Bible, world religions, nature and ecology, heroes and heroines of social reform, Unitarian Universalist history, and holy days around the world. The same is true of adult religious education.

In most of our congregations, regular children's worship-often held during a portion of the adult service-is part of the program. We seek to teach our children to be responsible for their own thinking and to nurture their own impulses of reverence, morality, respect for others, and self-respect.

Do Unitarian Universalists practice what they preach?

Religious liberals put less emphasis on formal beliefs and more on practical living. Our interest is in deeds, not creeds. We appreciate the biblical text, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."

Our members have been active leaders in the struggles for racial equality, civil liberty, international peace, and equal rights for all people. We work as individuals, in congregational social action, and in other groupings, including such denominational efforts as the UUA's Faith in Action Department and the UU-UN Office. We also work with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which brings critically needed social change to many parts of the world.

How can I become part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation?

Many of our societies offer introductory sessions, study groups, videotapes, and increasingly, a World Wide Web homepage to acquaint those interested in membership with our history, Principles, and programs. Individual appointments with ministers and members are encouraged. Many pamphlets are available through the UUA Bookstore. Usually, these are readily accessible in a church's foyer, and even small fellowships may have a good library of Unitarian Uni-versalist writings. The UUA website at www.uua.org is another good source of information about Unitarian Universalism.

All of these, along with your presence with us at worship and in our many other activities, provide the means for learning more about who Unitarian Universalists are, and whether you want to become one of us.

The last act of joining the congregation is simple, but significant: You write your name on a membership card or in the membership book or parish register.

We have no creedal requirements. With your signature you affirm your pledge to enter and to remain in a continuing and tolerant dialogue concerning the ways of truth and love, a dialogue within which free persuasion may occur; to share in our fellowship and in our corporate decision making; and to support with your gifts of energy and money our common work for the common good.

About the Author

Alice Blair Wesley is a Unitarian Universalist minister who has served congregations in College Station, Texas; Silver Spring, Maryland; Cherry Hill, New Jersey; Hagerstown, Maryland; and Harford County, Maryland.