

Unitarian Universalism and Sacred Texts

If you're new to Unitarian Universalism, you may have discovered that we are people of many different backgrounds and beliefs. We are brave, curious, and compassionate thinkers and doers. We create spirituality and community beyond boundaries, working for more justice and more love in our own lives and in the world. But you may still be wondering: What do Unitarian Universalists believe? What are their sources of inspiration and spiritual guidance?

Is there a Unitarian Universalist statement of belief?

There is no creedal test or statement of beliefs to which you must subscribe in our faith. We are guided by a set of seven Principles (uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles) that reflect the values we share and are promises we make to one another about how we will journey together in our congregations and what values we will bring into the world.

Do Unitarian Universalists have a central sacred text like the Bible?

Unitarian Universalists do not have one central sacred text. Our free and responsible search for meaning draws from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition as described in our six Sources: direct experience, words and deeds of prophetic people, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teaching, humanist teachings, and the teachings of Earth-centered traditions. Our faith draws from a wealth of sources and traditions,

Sacred texts in Unitarian Universalism are not chosen by any central authority but rather by individuals and by faith communities. Unitarian Universalist individuals make chosen texts sacred when they use them as guidance and inspiration for living. Congregations make particular texts sacred when they turn to them again and again for spiritual and ethical insight. The Christian scriptures, the Torah, the Koran, and the Tao De Ching can all be sacred texts for Unitarian Universalists, but so also can the writings of spiritual teachers and poets, prayers of the Twelve-Step tradition, and stories of the unfolding wonders of our natural world. Sacred to many Unitarian Universalists are the letters and speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the poetry of Rumi and Gibran, the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the writings of Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou, and many others at the forefront of movements challenging long-standing systemic oppression in our congregations, larger culture, and the world as a whole.

Some of these sources may affirm or imply theistic belief, and others may not. The one thing they will all have in common is a connection with the Principles that guide our way of being with each other and in the world.

The texts that are important in your personal spiritual journey are welcome in our congregations. Unitarian Universalists freely share with one another what is sacred to them as individuals and families. In fact, you may find that you enter into a deeper relationship with them as you bring new perspectives and learnings from other sources to texts that have become very familiar to you.

Do I have to accept or agree with anything considered a “sacred text?”

No. We commit to “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,” our third Principle, and to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” our fourth Principle. We value the search and the process of exploring what we consider sacred, both at the individual level and as a community. In fact, our commitment to these Principles often means that we explore texts that can challenge our own assumptions!

Are there any texts specifically for or about Unitarian Universalism?

There are many Unitarian Universalist-specific texts, including historic sermons and contemporary writings that have shaped and continue to shape Unitarian Universalism. Some are found in our hymnbooks, including “Each Night a Child is Born is a Holy Night” by Sophia Lyon Fahs, “Stand by this Faith” by Olympia Brown, “Choose to Bless the World” by Rebecca Parker, “Prayer for Living in Tension” by Joseph M. Cherry, and “A Litany of Atonement” by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley. One popular text, based on the work of twentieth-century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams using a metaphor from the Biblical story of David and Goliath, is frequently part of youth religious education:

Five Smooth Stones

Our first stone reminds us that we are part of a living tradition in which revelation is continuous. Together we engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Our second stone reminds us that we freely choose to enter into relationship and community with one another. Together as people of conscience, we build relationships of justice, equity, and compassion that further the wholeness of the interdependent web of all existence.

Our third stone reminds us that we have a moral obligation to work toward establishing a just and loving community. Together we speak and act prophetically with the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Our fourth stone reminds us that good things happen as a result of human effort. Together, as beings with inherent worth and dignity, we create goodness and virtue.

Our fifth stone reminds us that the divine and human capacities for achieving meaningful change are reason for optimism. Together we may be hopeful that change will occur toward a more just, loving, and free world.

How do I delve more deeply into what is sacred for me?

There are many ways to learn, share, find support, and connect with the sacred within Unitarian Universalism:

- exploring the resources published on the UUA Worship Web at uua.org/worship

- talking to religious professionals, including ordained ministers and religious educators, about your interests and questions
- visiting inSpirit, the Unitarian Universalist Association's bookstore, at uua.org/bookstore, or your church's library
- joining a covenant group, class, or book club at your congregation
- participating in an affinity group around common theological interests
- attending worship services, which often offer readings from a variety of sources

May your explorations be engaging and fruitful as you travel a Unitarian Universalist spiritual path!

Packs of 25 copies of this pamphlet can be ordered from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop at uua.org/bookstore.

Formerly a middle school English teacher, ERICA SHADOWSONG holds a B.A. in English and a Graduate Certificate in Interdisciplinary Studies in Folklore, concentration in Applied Storytelling, from George Mason University. In addition, she is a member of the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) and a 2016 Fahs Research Fellow, representing educational entrepreneurs in the practice of religious education. Her fellowship project explored the subject of devotional reading as a spiritual practice for Unitarian Universalists. A religious educator with seven years of experience in congregations, Erica has a passion for all things creative, especially the performing arts. She enjoys using her storytelling skills in Unitarian Universalist worship settings.