

Unitarian Universalism: A Presentation for the Interfaith Fellowship of Augusta

Rev. Dr. Gaye Ortiz

October 2018

Christian heresies

Let's begin in the year 70 CE, when the group who followed Jesus split from the Jewish faith. There were many theories about who Jesus was and what he was: adopted as a human to be the son of God, half human/half divine, divine from birth and even before birth, coexisting for all eternity with God; and there were believers who didn't think of Jesus as divine at all, and once the council of Nicea created the creed, and the council of Constantinople enshrined the Trinity – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – into Christian belief – then Unitarian was truly set apart as one of the losing perspectives.

Universalism was an early reaction to the suggestion that people who were not saved through Jesus's sacrifice were doomed to eternity in hell. Whatever happens until the end of time, Universalists believe that ultimately all souls will be reunited with God. This was in direct contradiction to Calvinism which insists upon predestination.

Once the Christian church became involved in making dogmas and doctrines, our theologies of Unitarianism and Universalism were labeled as heresies, and many of our ancestors in faith were the victims of religious persecution during and after the Reformation.

They both survived underground, perhaps because in other faith traditions, such as Judaism and Islam, they not only received a more tolerant welcome, they actually were elements of belief integral to at least Judaism and partially in Islam.

The Edict of Torda in 1568, issued by a Unitarian king in Transylvania, is where Unitarianism really got its start as a faith. The edict gave religious freedom to all in the kingdom. Susan Ritchie writes, "Positioned on the doctrinal border of Christianity, Unitarianism often found that its nearest theological kin were not Christian." (*Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*, 2014)

Part of our UU heritage comes from the explosive effect that Michael Servetus had upon Protestant reformers and Catholics alike, when he wrote his book *On the Errors of the Trinity*. He was ultimately executed, not by the Catholic Inquisition, but by John Calvin, who felt that his Reformation empire-building was threatened by the danger of Servetus pointing out that the doctrine of the Trinity is not actually in the Bible anywhere.

Many Jews, during the reign of Catholics who demanded conversion to Christianity or banishment, hid under cover and they were in demand in Spain, as the interest in biblical studies grew as a result of the Reformation's aim to make access to the Bible more widespread. And so people like Servetus learned about things like the lack of reference to the Trinity in Scripture, and anti-Trinitarianism sentiment rose up again centuries after the Arian controversy in the early Church.

Another change inspired at this time was to give the Jewish Scriptures back their own integrity as sacred texts, and not just treating them as prophetic writings within the Christian narrative, where their only value is in pointing to the revelation of Jesus as savior of the world.

Many Unitarians were interested and engaged in dialog with Judaism, because they wanted "to return to the earliest form of Christianity before it had been contaminated by imperial concerns, church hierarchy, and later additions to the creed" (Ritchie); they were interested in rediscovering and incorporating aspects of Jewish religious practice, because those would have been Jesus' own practices and beliefs. So there was a split of sorts within the Unitarian tradition after the Reformation: some anti-Trinitarians became known as Judaizers, who wanted to make the faith tradition more into the image of Judaism.

In contrast to the Judaizers, other Unitarians emphasized reason along with a close and personal reading of the Bible as the way to understand true religion.

When we look at Unitarianism in the 18th century, it's worth noting the British leadership of Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestley. These two Unitarian ministers, one in London, one in Leeds, were examples of Unitarians who "connected themselves intimately to the Jewish heritage and identified intensely with the Jewish people as the proper worshippers of the one, true God" (Ritchie).

Reason was emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the means by which nature and the universe were to be understood; people who were not Catholic or Anglican were known as dissenters or nonconformists.

The students of dissenting academies that were set up for them, because they were banned from Cambridge and Oxford universities, learned about the Bible and religion.

Their approach to the Bible rationally and scientifically involved the study of both the Old and New Testaments in their original tongues. In addition to Greek, dissenting students learned Hebrew as part of their nonconformist biblical education. So Hebrew, Jewish history and Semitic studies became integral components of the nonconformist education, and eventually, in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries, "there were many scholars who were well versed in the Hebrew scriptures, its language, and its laws".(Ritchie)

Transylvania and other Eastern European countries like Poland and Lithuania were far away from the power centers of Rome and Germany and Geneva, and they became the places where Unitarian thought and theology thrived in a climate of freedom and tolerance. This was in part made possible by the Ottoman Empire – remember how close at that time Islam was geographically to taking over Europe.

So just to recap, historically:

Unitarian: One God, not Trinitarian

Universalist: Universal salvation

Nowadays we call UUism a Liberal religion:

What binds us together as religious liberals is not the conclusion of a particular faith stance, but the process by which we search for meaning and truth. Without a creed or dogma, questioning is welcomed, reason is key and so is freedom of religion.

Five smooth stones James Luther Adams

Humanism played an important role in the post-WWI era, when many people of faith rejected a God that would bring that much death and destruction to the world. UU seminaries trained ministers in the 30s and 40s who went on to spread the idea of humanism that we must look to the best values of humanity and not rely on a supernatural being.

Unitarianism in the US in the 1800s became the religion of the elite, especially in Boston. Ralph Waldo Emerson introduced his philosophy of Transcendentalism to Unitarianism to counter the increasing intellectual, rational approach to the faith tradition. He encouraged people to find God through intuition, through evidence of nature.

We have had several Unitarian presidents of the US, including John Adams, John Quincy Adams, William Howard Taft.

The two faith traditions merged in the US in 1961; they were very similar in their beliefs and work in social justice, but differed in their bureaucratic structures.

Universalism's influence:

Universalism loves you as you are, while hoping to inspire you to be your best.

Say this on Sunday - "Our faith is not interested in saving your soul - we're here to help you unfold the awesome soul you already have" ~ Andrea Lerner

We respect your spiritual path and support you on your journey. We believe that the paths are many but that the goal is the same, and that the light of love shines within all of us.

In the 16th century, Unitarian minister Francis David said, 'We need not think alike to love alike'. And this has been the motto for Unitarian Universalism in advocating for respect for diversity. We feel that there are people out there that are hiding some part of themselves: atheists, pagans, gays, multi-ethnic and multi-faith families.

Sources

The UU faith tradition draws from the wisdom of other major religions, traditions and philosophies; to that end, the Golden Rule is something that we consider as a universal teaching, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Principles

We try to live by Seven Principles, which we ask congregations to affirm and promote.

The first principle of UU, which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

That principle has been the modern foundation of our commitment to human rights, from the abolitionist work that Unitarians and Universalists did in the pre-Civil War era to promoting the rights of women to vote and the ordination of women ministers in the 1800s. It inspired our UU ministers, like the Rev James Reeb, to go to Selma when Dr King called during the Selma to Montgomery march. Reeb was murdered by a group of white men who attacked a group of UU ministers on the streets of Selma. Viola Liuzzo was another UU who give her life during the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965; in that decade here in Augusta, women of our church worked with African-American and Jewish and Quaker women to start the Open Door kindergarten, housed at our church for decades.

The First Principle is also the basis for our commitment to LGBT rights, which began in 1970 with a faith-wide general resolution to end discrimination against homosexuals. UUCA is a Welcoming Congregation, a designation for a congregation that has completed a program of certification from our Association that says we are a safe space for LGBTQ community. We offer our premises for the Transgender Support Group that grew out of the Equality Clinic, which serves the under insured and noninsured LGBTQ population of the CSRA and beyond.

One Light (Unitarianism) shines through many windows (Universalism), illuminating human minds and hearts in many different ways. In our congregations we honor this truth by encouraging our members to reflect on the Light through whatever set of windows they find most illuminating. "

~ Rev. Forrest Church

To sum up: Unitarian Universalism is an organized religious fellowship that is covenantal but creedless, and offers principles of freedom, respect and reason for guidance in religious life.

Rev. A. Powell Davies: “People who think and work together for the values in which they believe have a better chance of achieving them than people who do not.”

Rev. Dr Gaye W. Ortiz,

October 2018.

Ten Good Reasons for Joining a Unitarian Universalist Congregation

- Because here we join with open hearts and minds to worship together, seeking what is sacred among us.
- Because here we are part of a long, liberal tradition of reason and tolerance, of hope and liberation.
- Because here we honor our Jewish and Christian roots, and also reach out to know the great truths found in other religious expressions
- Because here we acknowledge that revelation is never sealed and we empower ourselves to search for new truths.
- Because here we nurture our children's enthusiasm and encourage their questions.
- Because here we welcome diverse people and views.
- Because here we join our strength with others to create a more just society.
- Because here we respect the whole self--mind, body and spirit working together.
- Because here we encourage each other to be true to ourselves.
- Because here we build a supportive community that eases our loneliness and opens our hearts.

Written by Bill and Barbara Hamilton-Holway and Mark Harris ©1995 Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations from the UUA bookmark, "Ten Good Reasons for Joining a Unitarian Universalist Congregation"

Here are words I used several years when I was invited to give a reading from my faith tradition at an interfaith Thanksgiving service:

One of the cherished principles of Unitarian Universalism is respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. We know that none of us are alone, none independent. Whether we have barely enough or more than enough, no matter how hard we may have worked for it, whatever we have is not our own doing or deserving. Behind the plainest bit of food on our plate lies a vast network of human and natural forces, more complicated than we can imagine, which somehow come together to allow it to appear, as if by miracle, before us. And when we have followed the chain of connection as far as we can go, there remains the Mystery; knowing all that we can know, we still don't know All, neither the how nor the why. And in the face of that, what can we do but give thanks?

There are many ways in which we may express our gratitude. Here is one that many of our congregations use at Thanksgiving: (followed by Richard Fewkes' Thanksgiving prayer, #515 in SLT, which others have also suggested).

Frances
The Rev. Frances Manly