

Unitarian Universalists BELIEF BULLETIN

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

Official name: Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)

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Membership (1998): 312,467 worldwide; 213,342 North America; Congregations: 1,041;
Fellowshipped ministers: 1900 (49% male, 51% female)

Ministries and Organizations of UUA:

- Religious Education Action Clearing House (REACH)
- Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU, teens)
- Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans
- Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)

Publishers and Publications:

- Beacon Press
- Skinner House Books
- *UU World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*
- *Synapse* (YRUU)
- *UU and me!* (children)

Brief History of Unitarian Universalism

The concept of God as a single unitary being—as an alternative to traditional Christian Trinitarianism—can be traced in ancient times to the teachings of Arius (A.D. 256-336), a pastor in Alexandria, Egypt, who taught that the Son was a created being and not equal to the Father. Arius, and his movement called Arianism, argued that the Bible does not teach a Trinitarian concept of God and that Jesus made no claims to deity. His Unitarian view was rejected as heretical by the Council of Nicea in 325. The Unitarian view remained dormant in church history until after the Protestant Reformation when Michael Servetus (1511-1553) in Spain, and Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) in Poland, questioned anew the historic Trinitarian doctrine. Later, a Hungarian named Frances David (1510-1579) led a movement that was the first to be labeled Unitarian. In England, Unitarianism raised its head in the teachings of John Biddle (1615-1662), who attempted to disprove the Trinity from the Bible.

In the United States, the first church to adopt Unitarian doctrine officially was King's Chapel in Boston, Mass. In 1786, the congregation left its Episcopal roots to embrace the Unitarian view. Soon afterward, Harvard University followed suit.

The American Unitarian Association (AUA) was formally established in 1825. It was led by William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), pastor of Federal Street Congregational Church in Boston. Channing, as did most Unitarian ministers of the time, despite their rejection of Trinitarianism, still relied on the Bible for their theological formulations.

Unitarians claim that a number of prominent eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans embraced Unitarian, or deist, beliefs. They include five presidents of the United States: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft. Other famous Americans claimed by Unitarians include Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Susan B. Anthony.

In the twentieth century Unitarianism abandoned any claim to biblical authority. In fact, in the years from 1918 to 1937, the movement internally debated the very existence of God. Eventually, it fell under the domination of naturalism and humanism. This culminated in 1933 with the publishing of the starkly naturalistic *Humanist Manifesto*. One-half of its signees were Unitarian ministers. Some prominent Americans in the late twentieth century who were claimed by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) included statesman Adlai Stevenson, writer Robert Fulghum, actor Paul Newman, poet Carl Sandburg, and writer and producer Rod Serling.

In 1961, the Unitarian churches merged with a small movement called the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). In the decades since, the UUA has developed into a society of local congregations that focus primarily on liberal social, political, environmental, and gender-related issues. One surprising trend is the increasing growth of neo-paganism and witchcraft in some UUA congregations. The influence of secular humanism, while still strong, has diminished somewhat with the rise of post-modernism.

The UUA Today

In 1997, a survey was taken of more than 8,000 active members of the UUA in North America. The results revealed a number of surprising facts about people involved in the modern UUA.

When asked about their theological perspective, 46% described themselves as *humanist* (atheist or agnostic). 55% regarded themselves as earth or nature-centered (pantheists), Buddhists, Hindu, undefined theists, mystics (New Agers) or other (pagan). About 1.5% identified themselves as Jewish. Only 9.5% described themselves as Christian by any definition.

The median age of UUA respondents to the poll was 55.7 years, and only 27.5% still have children at home. 67.6% of the respondents were women, meaning less than one-third of UUA members are men. Only 27% of the UUA respondents answering the survey described themselves as heterosexual men. 10.5% identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender.

As expected, more than 78% of UUA followers favored greater racial and cultural diversity in their congregations. Nevertheless, the most surprising finding of the survey was that 98% of all UUA people described themselves as European Americans (white), meaning only 2% represent ethnic or racial minorities.

Beliefs of the UUA

Complete religious freedom for each individual

Unitarian Universalists affirm and defend the right of all people to accept or reject any or all religions beliefs. No specific doctrinal perspective is required for membership.

We uphold the free search for truth. We will not be bound by a statement of belief. We do not ask anyone to subscribe to a creed. We say ours is a noncreedal religion. Ours is a free faith. (Marta Flanagan, *We Are Unitarian Universalists*, <http://www.uua.org/bookstore/weare.html>)

Biblical Response

Christians also affirm the right of free, moral individuals to decide their religious beliefs for themselves. No person should ever be coerced to profess a religion's tenets that they do not actually believe.

Nonetheless, Christians also affirm the rights of local and national religious organizations to prescribe doctrinal and behavior standards for membership. Nearly all historic Christian organizations require adherence to essential biblical teachings on the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation. Evangelical churches generally require testimony of an experience of acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior and Lord (see Rom. 10:9-10).

Reason is our guide to truth.

In the last century, most Unitarian Universalists maintained that human reason, intuition, and scientific research were the only reliable sources for discovering all truth. Generally, they rejected supernatural sources of knowledge—especially divine sources of revelation such as the Bible or other religious texts.

Nonetheless, in recent decades, many neo-pagan Unitarian Universalists have accepted supernatural beliefs that defy naturalistic presuppositions. According to Marta Flanagan,

The living tradition that we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. (Marta Flanagan, *We Are Unitarian Universalists*, <http://www.uua.org/bookstore/weare.html>)

Biblical Response

Christians affirm that human reason, intuition, and scientific research have some limited value for discovering truth about the natural world or spiritual reality. However, they maintain that neither human reason, nor intuition, nor science are capable of discerning all truth—especially that regarding spiritual reality. That must come from special divinely inspired revelation (see Rom. 1:18-20).

Christians, therefore, believe that God has revealed truth about His own nature, the creation, and redemption only in the Bible and in the Person of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

No particular belief about God is taught.

What the Unitarian Universalist fellowship offers me is the encouragement to be utterly my most responsible self in matters of theological belief. When I use the word *God or God/ess*, it is with the full understanding that I speak from personal conviction and experience, and not from any desire to impose my “revelation” on others.
(Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age*)

Unitarian Universalists do not have any stated doctrinal belief concerning the existence or nature of a god. It is entirely the prerogative of each individual to determine what, if any, concept of deity they wish to accept. Historically, Unitarians rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity as polytheistic. Currently, however, some Unitarian Universalists profess belief in gods and goddesses of various numbers and kinds.

Biblical Response

The Bible teaches that there is only one infinite and eternal God. He is the creator of all that exists in the universe. The Bible teaches that this One God exists eternally as three separate persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 8:6, 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22, 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2).

Christians maintain that this concept of God is absolutely true and that any other concept is false. Belief in and worship of any other god or gods is considered idolatry and is unacceptable in Christian churches and fellowships (see Ex. 20:1-6; Deut. 5:6-8, 6:4).

Jesus Christ was a great religious teacher (but not necessarily unique).

But whatever we [Unitarian Universalists] call ourselves, (Christian, Jew, theist, agnostic, humanist, atheist), most of us would agree that the important thing about Jesus is not his supposed miraculous birth or the claim that he was resurrected from death,

but rather how he lived . . . The Apostles Creed and other such statements of dogmatic theology entirely miss this point. (John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith—An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*)

Unitarian Universalists who believe that Jesus actually lived—and many do not—regard Him to be merely a moral teacher or religious reformer. They generally reject any notion that He was a divinely inspired leader, and especially reject the claim that He was the unique incarnation of God.

Biblical Response

The Bible affirms that Jesus not only was a genuine, historical figure who led a moral or religious movement, but was also the unique incarnation of God. Thus, He was fully deity and claimed equality with God (see John 1:1,14, 5:17-18, 23, 8:56-59, 10:30-33; Col. 1:15-20, 2:9).

Jesus lived a sinless life and performed numerous miraculous acts that are reported in the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Ultimately, He prophesied His own death and physical resurrection (see John 2:18-22), and appeared physically to more than 500 of His disciples (see Luke 24: 36-43; 1 Cor. 15:1-8).

Mankind is basically good.

Unitarian Universalists reject the biblical doctrine of original sin. They teach that basically all people are good and have no need for spiritual redemption from the effects of sin.

Doctrinally, Universalism’s principle theological contribution lies in striking hell from the theological sense. Complementing this, Unitarianism (in addition to affirming God’s oneness) removed original sin. Together they conspire brilliantly on behalf of goodness.
(John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith—An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*)

Biblical Response

The Bible teaches that mankind—descended from Adam and Eve—is, by nature, sinful. Thus, people are incapable of enjoying a relationship with a holy God and are in need of full redemption. No acts of righteousness or good works can restore a sinful person to a right relation with God. Neither can a person overcome the effects that sin has both in this life and for eternity (see Rom. 3:23, 7:14-25; 1 John 1:8-10).

Salvation is finding one’s own self-fulfillment and truth

Unitarian Universalists, as indicated, do not subscribe to any formal doctrinal perspective. Also, as indicated, they have not stated a position on the nature (or existence) of God. In addition, they have no concept of original sin, and, in fact, reject the notion of mankind’s sinfulness and affirm the basic goodness of humanity.

As a result, Unitarian Universalists see no essential need for the traditional concepts of Christian redemption and

salvation. Since men are not sinners, they do not need forgiveness from sin.

For them, salvation—for lack of a better word—is simply an individual's achievement of self-actualization. In this view, whatever way one finds meaning or purpose for her life is valid.

For us, salvation is not an otherworldly journey, flown on wings of dogma. It is ethical striving and moral growth: respect for the personalities and experiences of others; faith in human dignity and potentiality; aversion to sanctimony and bigotry; reverence for the gift of life; confidence in a true harmony of mind and spirit, of nature and human nature; faith in the ability to give and receive love; and a quest for broad, encompassing religious expression—spiritual yet practical, personal and communal. (Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age*)

Biblical Response

Christians believe that since sin exists and mankind by nature is sinful—that all people need personal salvation from its effects.

It is through the sacrificial atonement of Christ by His death on the cross and the bodily resurrection that redemption was made available to all people (see 1 Cor. 15:1-8). They believe salvation is accessed “by grace through faith” in Jesus Christ alone (see Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

Life after death is an open question— heaven and hell are states of mind

Most modern Unitarian Universalists do not concern themselves to a great extent over issues of life-after-death. Those who do believe in some concept of existence after this life describe it in vague terms. Many Unitarian Universalists simply state that heaven and hell are only states of mind in this life—that may or may not extend beyond death.

Some neo-pagans in the UUA probably have adopted eastern or New Age concepts of reincarnation or spiritualism.

Nearly all Unitarian Universalists reject any concept of an eternal hell for punishment of sin. One UUA writer praised the Universalists historic rejection of the traditional Christian view.

The creedal assumptions formulated at Nicaea must be in error. Even though the Nicæan Council had pointed out that God's justice required the punishment of sin, it was self-evident that a good and perfect God created humans to grow eternally in the goodness of their creator. (Jack Mendelsohn, *Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age*)

Biblical Response

The Bible clearly affirms that all people live on after death

(see 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23-24; Rev. 6:9-10, 14:13). It indicates that those who received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord will abide in heaven for eternity (see John 3:16, 14:3).

The doctrine of eternal hell was taught by Jesus and affirmed in the Bible. He taught that the righteous will have eternal life, but the wicked will suffer eternal punishment (see Matt. 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thes. 1:9; Rev. 20-22).

Witnessing to UUAs

1. Be sure of your own faith and the Bible. Christians need to understand the basic tenets of Christian faith and why the Bible is reliable.
2. Inquire about the Unitarian Universalist's personal beliefs. Since the UUA has no standard doctrinal beliefs, members vary widely in their personal convictions. Ask her questions like, “What is God like—according to your understanding?” or “Who is Jesus Christ in your opinion?”
3. Focus on the essential issues of the Christian faith: God, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and salvation. Do not get sidetracked discussing denominational differences or other non-essential issues.
4. Do not argue. Ask questions about her beliefs and listen to her answers. Give reasonable answers to her questions or objections about your faith in Christ.
5. Share your personal testimony of faith in Christ. The Unitarian Universalist may have many intellectual objections, but she cannot argue with your experience.
6. Share the plan of salvation. Remember, many in the UUA have a distorted view of Christianity, and she may never have even heard the simple plan of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.
7. Invite your Unitarian Universalist friend to read Christian literature that you will provide for her. Some excellent authors and books that will challenge her intellectually to consider Christianity are listed below.

RESOURCES:

Charles Colson: *Burden of Truth
Answers to Your Kid's Questions*

Winfried Corduan: *Reasonable Faith: Basic
Christian Apologetics*

William Lane Craig: *Reasonable Faith:
Christian Truth and Apologetics*

Norman Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks: . . *When Skeptics
Ask: Basic Christian Apologetics*

C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*

Paul Little: *Know Why You Believe*

Josh McDowell: *More Than A Carpenter
The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*

John Newport: *Life's Ultimate Questions*

Francis A. Schaeffer: *The Complete Works of
Francis A. Schaeffer*

Lee Strobel: *The Case for Christ
The Case for Faith*

Ravi Zacharias: *Can Man Live Without God?*

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