

## **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?

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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