

The Flaming Chalice

Summary: The official symbol of Unitarian Universalism is a flaming chalice. Originally a sign of refuge for those escaping Nazi persecution, the symbol now holds meanings as varied as the thousands of U.U. congregations that light chalices at the beginning of their weekly services.

“We light this chalice for the light of truth, the warmth of love, and the fire of commitment.” With these words, a member of First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts lights a candle, its base secure in the thick white ceramic chalice on the altar. Across the country, a woman in Berkeley, California, starts worship in the same way, with a chalice lighting and reading. “We light this chalice as a symbol of our gathered community,” she says as she lights the candle in the thin, bronze chalice, ensconced in two large metal rings, “and [of] the divine spark in each of us.”

The flaming chalice officially became a Unitarian symbol during World War II, but it had long been a symbol of religious liberty and political resistance in the face of oppression throughout Europe. During the Middle Ages, when only clergy were allowed to drink from the communion cup, a priest from Prague named Jan Hus defied the Catholic Church by serving his congregation both the bread and the wine, effectively declaring, as Unitarian Universalists do today, that all people have equal access to the divine. After his death, Hus’ followers continued to share the full Communion with one another in secret and took up a flaming chalice as their symbol.

During World War II, the Reverend Charles Joy, Director of the Unitarian Service Committee, asked his friend Hans Deutsch to create a symbol that would represent the spirit of their work. At the time, the Unitarian Service Committee, a rescue and relief operation, was helping Unitarians, Jews, and other persecuted groups escape the Nazis. Since Nazi informers were numerous, Reverend Joy felt refugees needed “a symbol of hope” to assure them they were in good hands as they traveled to safety in a network much like the Underground Railroad. The organization began using the symbol in French refugee camps and soon it was understood that anyone carrying a note with a flaming chalice could be trusted. Sympathizers would draw the symbol in the dirt outside their home as a signal to those in need of a place to stay: a light in the darkness.

Near the end of the war, the Universalist Service Committee was established and the two organizations began working together on joint Unitarian-Universalist relief programs. After the war, the flaming chalice, ensconced in a circle, became the emblem of Unitarianism. At the time, the traditional Universalist logo was similar: a cross within a circle. When the two denominations merged in 1961, they symbolized their union by combining the symbols of their faith: the flaming chalice, in the shape of a cross, standing tall within both circles.

The official symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association was designed to be a “visual representation of a modern and dynamic faith” and intentionally open to interpretation. As its history reveals, it can be seen as a communion cup available to all, a symbol of religious freedom, or light in the darkness. For Reverend Joy, it was “a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice.”

The flaming chalice’s popularity in print led to a grassroots movement to incorporate its physical use in congregational worship. Since congregations are independent and encourage freedom of expression, different kinds of chalices are often used and members of the congregation are often invited to speak about what the chalice represents to the community.

Worship typically concludes with a chalice extinguishing, each as diverse as the community that surrounds it: “We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.”