

Unitarian Universalism Develops

Summary: Unitarians—those who believe that God is a single entity—and Universalists—those who affirm that God’s love and salvation extends to everyone—have existed since the life of Jesus. In 1961, after centuries of persecution, the two strains of thought united under the banner of Unitarian Universalism. This theologically liberal and socially progressive religion welcomes the influence of many spiritual traditions, values reason and compassion, and lacks a binding creed.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious tradition that deeply values reason and compassion. Unitarianism is chiefly defined by the belief in one God, as opposed to a Trinity or pantheon of gods. Universalism focuses on the belief that all humans are or will one day be fully reconciled or “saved” by God. The Unitarian Universalist tradition stems from both of these belief systems, and came about by the uniting of these two paths.

Although sometimes known by other names, currents of unitarian and universalist thought have been part of the Christian tradition since the life of Jesus. Many early Christians upheld the oneness of God and viewed Jesus as a human prophet and teacher. Some early Christians also affirmed universal salvation, or the belief that God’s love extends to everyone and all people are united in heaven. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, the doctrine of the Trinity emerged as orthodox and alternative ways of understanding the relationship between God and Jesus came to be considered heretical. More than two hundred years later, the Synod of Constantinople, with the support of the Roman Emperor Justinian, declared as heretical the belief that universal salvation was assured. For the next millenium, it was difficult and dangerous to express unitarian or universalist views in public.

During the Protestant Reformation, a select few began questioning the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and, depending on the location, they encountered intensified persecution or they paved the way for religious freedom. In 1553, the Spanish theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for promoting anti-Trinitarian ideas. In *Christianity Restored*, Servetus argued that the doctrine of the Trinity had no biblical basis and that the life of Jesus had been embellished beyond recognition. Christianity, he urged, must return to a well-reasoned interpretation of the Bible. Fearing persecution by Catholic authorities, Servetus passed through Geneva, where his arrest and execution were endorsed by John Calvin.

In Transylvania, Francis David, after converting from Catholicism to Lutheranism and then Calvinism, also concluded that there was no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. This led him to found the first explicitly Unitarian church. Jesus, David believed, was to be followed but not worshiped. As the court preacher for King John Sigismund, he convinced the ruler not to establish a state religion but to declare religious freedom throughout the realm. This proclamation was issued in 1568, making it the world's first edict in support of religious tolerance. Today, centuries later, Unitarian Universalists champion tolerance in both the local congregation and the public sphere.

The era of religious tolerance in Transylvania came to an abrupt end when King Sigismund, who also had become a Unitarian, died three years after the proclamation was issued. At the order of the king's Catholic successor, Francis David was imprisoned until his death. Nevertheless, the church he founded survives to this day. A closely related church endured in Poland until 1658, by which time Unitarian beliefs were beginning to spread in the Netherlands and England. Even though England ruled the denial of the Trinity punishable by death in 1648, and excluded Unitarians from the Act of Toleration in 1689, the ideas survived and contributed to the founding of the Unitarian denomination in England in 1774. Meanwhile, the doctrine of universal salvation was preached during the English Civil War by Gerard Winstanley of the Diggers (who also opposed private property), by Jane Leade and the mystical Philadelphian Society, and by the German pietist Ephrata community in Pennsylvania. In the 1760s the Welsh Methodist James Rely began preaching universalism in London.

Both Puritan and Baptist ministers began gravitating to unitarian and universalist ideas during the period leading up to the American Revolution. The first Universalist congregation in North America was organized in 1774 by John Murray, a disciple of James Rely; Boston's King's Chapel publicly embraced Unitarianism just after the Revolution. Conflict between Unitarians and the orthodox soon split the publicly supported churches of Massachusetts, leading to the organization of the American Unitarian Association. Theological ferment within this tradition led to the emergence of the Transcendentalist movement, represented most famously by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Universalist denomination was organized in 1793 and grew with great rapidity in the early decades of the 19th century.

Theologically liberal and socially progressive, Unitarians and Universalists of the 19th century emphasized God's love for all humankind and the necessity of being good to others while rejecting the

concept of damnation and the practice of slavery. Thomas Starr King, who served both a Universalist and a Unitarian congregation, summarized the denominations in this way: “Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, while the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned.” Gradually, both traditions broadened to include post-Christian theists and, beginning in the 20th century, “humanists” who eschewed all ideas of the divine or of the supernatural.

Given the many points of convergence for Unitarians and Universalists, the two denominations considered merging on several occasions, first in 1899 and then again in 1925. Over the next few decades, their union only continued to solidify. Finally, in 1961, Unitarians and Universalists came together to form Unitarian Universalism: a new and dynamic faith that affirms freedom of thought, religious diversity, and seven guiding—but not binding—principles.

The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism are:

1. *The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*
2. *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;*
3. *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*
4. *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*
5. *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*
6. *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*
7. *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Today, Unitarian Universalists draw on their own experience of the transcendent and understanding of God, as well as the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men.” They also draw on the “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires [them] in [their] ethical and spiritual life,” including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Humanist teachings and the teachings of earth-based traditions. They believe in lifelong learning and are constantly engaged in what it means to live a good life and do well by others. Unitarian Universalists come together in community across their differences to share the journey of life and work for justice in the world.