

# Unitarian Universalist Association

By Angela S. Christ and Tim Martin

**Founding Date:** The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) was formed on May 21, 1961.

**Headquarters:** USA – 25 Beacon Street, Boston MA 02108. Canada – 705-55 Eglinton Avenue, East, Toronto, Ontario M4P 1G8.

**Organizational Structure:** Each local assembly is independent and autonomous, choosing a preacher who will preach as his/her conscience demands.<sup>1</sup>

**Publications/Publishers:** Beacon Press, Skinner House Books, *UU World*, *Synapse* (a magazine for teens).

**Schools:** Both Starr King School in Berkeley, California and Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, Illinois train people to become UUA leaders, not only in their churches as ministers but to spread the UUA message in the world.

**Unique Terms:** Free Mind (one is open to any truth, so long as it aids in moral progression and spiritual growth).<sup>2</sup> “Wholeness” often refers to racial reconciliation.

## HISTORY

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) was formed in 1961 as a merger of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Universalist Churches of America (UCA). Both the AUA and UCA began as liberal expressions of the Christian faith in the mid eighteenth century. During this time, liberal Christianity had two main thrusts to its theological movement. The first was the use of reason. If a theological concept was deemed beyond reason, it was rejected as untrue. The second was the need for moral change. If a doctrine promoted moral development over another, it was valued over the others.

**Unitarianism:** UUA adherents claim that Unitarian beliefs can be traced back to Arius of Alexandria (A.D. 256-336). Arius rejected the doctrines of Jesus’ deity, teaching that the Son was a created being, thus, not God. The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) called this belief heresy and caused the movement to be stifled and persecuted for many centuries.

In Europe, Unitarian concepts of God resurfaced in the sixteenth century when Michael Servetus and Faustus Socinus doubted the Trinity. Frances David, a court preacher in Transylvania, converted to the Unitarian beliefs “because he could find no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, in 1568 the Unitarian king of Transylvania, King Sigismund, passed the first edict that called for religious freedom.

In the United States, Unitarian thought began to take root in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century as a liberal form of Christianity. Several major figures were Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, Ebenezer Gay and Joseph Priestly. Jonathan Mayhew, regarded as “one of the first individuals to represent the Liberal Faith”<sup>4</sup> preached a sermon in his Boston Church called “Christian Sobriety” in 1763. In this sermon, he complained of the orthodox tendency to change Jesus’ Biblical description of “the Son of God” to “God the Son.”<sup>5</sup> Mayhew explained that “it was not some other living Being, agent or person, distinct from the Father, that dwelt in the man Christ Jesus . . . but the Father himself.”<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon, *Unitarian Christianity*, that unified the growing liberal movement. Therein, he claimed that the Trinity is not only unbiblical, but irrational.<sup>7</sup> He claimed that God’s unity produces practical benefits by increasing true piety. When focusing on unity, piety “has a chasteness, a singleness, most favorable to religious awe and love.”<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, the Trinity splits a person’s devotion to three infinite persons, all having equal claim to worship in three different respects. Hence, the Trinity doctrine negatively effects the development of piety.

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Some historians have called Channing's sermon the "*magna charta* of rational Christianity."<sup>9</sup> It brought together the teachings and beliefs of liberals who agreed upon these distinct ideas. Six years after the sermon, the American Unitarian Association (AUA) was formed with 125 churches joining.<sup>10</sup> With a well defined doctrine, and now a formal organization, Unitarianism had officially commenced.

Interestingly, though all the people above are hailed by Unitarians as holding to Unitarian beliefs, these men taught extremely conflicting ideas about the nature of Jesus. For instance, Channing and Arius taught that Jesus was only a man; Mayhew believed that Jesus and the Father are the same person (modalism). Michael Servetus, a pantheist, denied that neither Jesus nor the Father were actually persons.<sup>11</sup> The only doctrinal link to some of these men is that they taught against the Trinity. Hence, the unifying factor of Unitarianism is not the denial of Jesus' deity, but a denial of the trinity.

**Universalism:** Universalism is the teaching that all people will be saved. Proponents look to Gnostics and some early Church Fathers in the first few centuries, including Origen and Clement of Alexandria as holding to universalism. Like Unitarianism, it was not until the 1700's that universalism took root in America. One early universalism proponent was Dr. George de Benneville, who arrived in America in 1741. He was a doctor and preacher who spread his message through Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He also "arranged for the translation of a German book about universalism, *The Everlasting Gospel* that later became influential among later Universalists.<sup>12</sup>

Some Unitarian proponents were also Universalists. In 1784, Charles Chauncy published *The Mystery Hid from Ages*, a defense of universalism. Therein, Chauncy taught that God would not have created humanity "unless he intended to make them finally happy." If God is sovereign, He is able to bring about His desire for a happy humanity. Thus, nobody will suffer for eternity. When the Bible speaks of people not being saved in the next state (Matt. 7:4, 22:14, Luke 13:23), Chauncy said that this did not refer to the final state, but a second state of existence. People will be "miserable in the next state of existence, and to a great degree, and for a long time, in proportion to the moral depravity they have contracted in this."<sup>13</sup> After this state comes the final state wherein all people will be happy.

This teaching on Universal salvation came from the early American liberal tendency to exalt "the human capacity for self determination."<sup>14</sup> This over attributing of the human will came, not from the examination of scripture, but from a cultural shift that was growing in America.

In 1778, the Universalist groups held its first formal association, which resulted in the founding of the Universalist Church of America in 1785. Hosea Ballou, a prominent leader of the movement, wrote the first consistent philosophy on universalism in his *Treatise on Atonement* (1805), in which he denied several orthodox doctrines, including total depravity, eternal damnation, and the Trinity. He emphasized that God is "infinite love"<sup>15</sup> and therefore saves all. This resulted in increased popularity.

**Unitarian Universalist Association:** Both movements became increasingly involved in social justice causes, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As people realized the numerous similarities between the two, they felt they "could have a stronger liberal religious voice if they merged their efforts."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the two groups formed the UUA in 1961, and continued their labors together as a reflection of their beliefs.<sup>17</sup> As of 2001, there were approximately 160,000 American adult members who contribute to the organization, but 629,000 call themselves Unitarian Universalist, both of which grow annually.<sup>18</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the AUA sought to base its theology on the Bible. In the twentieth century however, this changed. Many leaders became atheists. In 1933, the first "Humanist Manifesto" was published. "The Humanist Manifesto of 1933 was substantially rooted in Unitarianism. Fifteen of the original thirty-four signers were Unitarian ministers; another was a Universalist."<sup>19</sup> Today, people with any belief system would be accepted into the UUA: "Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and others."<sup>20</sup>

## DOCTRINE

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**Authority:** In order to be a Unitarian Universalist, one must hold to the principle of the Free Mind. "The church insists that intellectual honesty, moral progress and spiritual growth in religion are dependent upon each man being receptive to all pronouncements of truth, wherever and by whomsoever uttered."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Free Mind is each individual being open to any truth, so long as it aids in spiritual growth.

At the same time, Unitarian Universalists are to be tolerant of all people's beliefs, so there is no universal authority. There is only individual authority, namely one's reason or conscience. "For Unitarian Universalists the individual is the ultimate source of religious authority."<sup>22</sup>

**Scripture:** Since all belief systems are paths to salvation, scripture for the Unitarian Universalist "includes all the writings in which men have sought to express the basic ethical and spiritual insights of the race."<sup>23</sup> Hence, there are limitless scriptures. In essence, each individual compiles their own scripture according how they feel led.<sup>24</sup> The Christian Bible is solely an anthology of human documents about God. It is not inspired, inerrant, or authoritative.<sup>25</sup>

**God:** Because of UUA's diversity of beliefs, there is no set teaching on God(s). One can believe whatever one's conscious reveals. Each person's God comes from their experiences, which results in a God who reflects more about the believer than about their God. Therefore, God can be found by a better understanding or realization of oneself. They deny the Trinity, many believing that there is a unitary God, hence "*Unitarian Universalist*." For those who do believe in a God, their God is all good, characterized by love.<sup>26</sup>

**Jesus:** Just as with God, one's beliefs about Jesus are subject to personal interpretation. Gilbert A. Phillips admits that he has "taken only those things that I want for my picture [of Jesus] and have ignored those things I do not want."<sup>27</sup> For most Unitarian Universalists, they believe Jesus existed as a great teacher, but they deny His deity, perfection, infallibility, and atonement. If they call Him 'Christ,' they mean that He is one of many Christs, for every culture has its own. If they believe in His deity, they also believe it points to man's potential divinity, something all should live daily.<sup>28</sup>

**Sin:** Unitarian Universalists will seldom use the word "sin." When they do, they do not mean disobedience to God. Instead, "When man sins he is blocking the perfectibility of his own conscience, for spirit is being degraded by the external act."<sup>29</sup> Believing that humans are basically good, UUA sees sin as anything hindering spiritual growth. Unlike the doctrine of total depravity, Unitarian Universalists believe sin can be overcome. "Given the freedom to guide himself according to the best that religion can teach, motivated by his own properly developed conscience, man can gain ultimate victory over himself."<sup>30</sup> They can have such victory because humanity has potential divinity.

**Purpose:** UUA's "emphasis is upon giving man a world-uniting, intelligent faith which will build noble character, enduring spiritual resources and a dependable credo for exalted living."<sup>31</sup> Their purpose, therefore, is to bring people together in a common faith and cause. This cause is living the best a person can. The beliefs of UUA can be summarized in the Great Commandment to love God with all of one's being. People accomplish such love by becoming better humans. The church is a tool to achieve these purposes by meeting together and helping one another make the world better and grow together as a community.<sup>32</sup>

**Salvation:** Unitarian Universalism distinctly rejects nearly all of the orthodox doctrines pertaining to salvation, including original sin, total depravity, atonement, and eternal damnation. Because of their belief that God is all good and all loving, they cannot imagine that a good and loving God would condemn humans to hell or punishment. Instead, their God saves all people universally, hence "*Unitarian Universalism*." When a person reaches "a higher moral and spiritual plane, through living the exalted precepts of his religion, he is achieving his own salvation."<sup>33</sup>

**Death:** "Until scientist or seer can produce answers, postulations on death and immortality must stem from one's own personal conviction."<sup>34</sup> This is precisely what Unitarian Universalists do: they decide what they believe about death and the after-life based on one's subjectivity. Consequently, there are varied views about death. Some believe something lives on, whether it is a spiritual essence, the soul, or human personality. Others hold that humans only live in the memory and experience of others. Many consider death to be the end of the life cycle without any further existence.<sup>35</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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**Authority/Scripture:** Reason cannot be authoritative because it cannot discern the spiritual or the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:13-16). The Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21; 3:16). Because of its inspiration, it is authoritative (Zech. 7:12; Ps. 119:118-120; Lk. 24:25). It is also inerrant (Tit. 1:2; Jn. 17:17; Ps. 119:60; Prov. 30:5). It is sufficient to save (2 Tim. 3:14-15; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23) and equip for life and ministry (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Ps. 119:1).

**God:** The Bible reveals many things about God, including His existence (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 14:1; 19:1-2; Rom. 1:18-20). While God is good (Lk. 18:19; Ps. 100:5) and loving (1 Jn. 4:10; Gal. 2:20), He is also holy (Ps. 71:22; 1 Pet. 1:15-16), righteous (Rom. 9:20-21), and wrathful (Heb. 1:9). Though there is only one God (Dt. 6:4-5; Jas. 2:19), God exists as three fully divine persons, who are called the Father (Gen. 1:1), the Son (Jn. 1:1-4; 20:28-31; Tit. 2:13; Rom. 9:5), and the Holy Spirit (Ac. 5:3-4; Ps. 139:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:10-11). They are distinct, the Son from the Father (Jn. 17:24; 1 Jn. 2:1), the Spirit from the Father (Jn. 14:26; Rom. 8:27) and from the Son (Jn. 16:7).

**Jesus:** The incarnate Christ is fully God (Col. 1:19; 2:9), for He possesses divine attributes like eternality (Jn. 8:58; 17:5), and authority (Matt. 5:21-22 cf. 7:28; 28:18). Christ is sinless (1 Jn. 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22 qt. Isa. 53:9), for He always pleases the Father (Jn. 8:29; 15:10).

**Nature of Man:** God created man in His image (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1-3). This original likeness was very good (Gen. 1:31). Sin originated when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-19). Because of the fall, all humanity inherits guilt (Rom. 5:12-19) and corruption (Ps. 51:1-5; Eph. 2:3). This inheritance means that man is totally depraved, lacking any spiritual good in the human nature (Isa. 64:6; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:18; Tit. 1:15). People are not basically good; instead, they are sinful (Rom. 3:10-18; Jer. 17:9).

**Salvation:** The need for atonement lies in man's sinfulness (Rom. 3:10-18; Jer. 17:9) and God's holy nature (Ps. 71:22; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Because "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), Jesus sacrificed His life as "a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28) as the absolute sacrifice for sins (Heb. 9:6-15; Lev. 17:11). His work on the cross served as propitiation of God's wrath for sins. There is no universal salvation.

**Death:** The Bible teaches clearly the nature of death and the after-life. Death is the result of sin for all men (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). For the unbeliever, there is a second death of eternal separation and punishment from God (Matt. 25:41, 46; Rev. 21:8; 20:14) as a result of sin (Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 2:5-10). Death for believers means being in God's presence (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8). Therefore, death does not and cannot separate believers from Christ (2 Cor. 5:8; Rom. 8:38-39). Scripture teaches that hell is the literal place of eternal punishment (Mk. 9:43, 48; Matt. 25:30; Rev. 14:9-11). Believers will reside forever with God (Rev. 21:3; Jn. 3:16).

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Nicholls Booth, *Introducing Unitarian Universalism* (Pamphlet; Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 28.
- <sup>2</sup> Booth, 3, 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Harris "Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith," Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://www.uua.org/pamphlet/3600.html> (accessed January 5, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, *An American Reformation*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 323.
- <sup>5</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Christian Sobriety*, (Boston: Richard and Samuel Draper, 1763), 59.
- <sup>6</sup> Mayhew, *Christian Sobriety*, 61.
- <sup>7</sup> William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," in *American Religious Thought of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Bruce Kuklick ed., (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1987), 15.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>9</sup> H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 484.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Willis, *Servetus and Calvin*, (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1877) 66. Servetus would say that they are persons, but, he defined person in an unusual way. He taught that the word "Person...is always to be understood in the sense of the Greek *prosopon* and the Latin *persona*, a mask, an appearance, and not any *real* or individual thing" (*ibid.*, 60).
- <sup>12</sup> "Unitarian Universalist Church of America," *Wikipedia* (accessed June 6, 2007) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian\\_Universalist\\_Church\\_of\\_America#History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalist_Church_of_America#History).
- <sup>13</sup> *American Christianity*, 489-92.
- <sup>14</sup> Mark Noll, *America's God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 138.
- <sup>15</sup> Booth, 22-23.
- <sup>16</sup> Mark W. Harris, *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*, <http://www.uua.org/info/origins.html> (accessed 27 Nov. 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> Harris.
- <sup>18</sup> John Dart, "Churchgoers from elsewhere - Surveys: 'UUISM' Unique - Unitarian Universalist Association," *FindArticles.com* (*Christian Century* Dec 5, 2001) [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_33\\_118/ai\\_80850426](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_33_118/ai_80850426) (accessed 28 Nov. 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher L. Walton, "Humanists celebrate 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary with new manifesto" *Unitarian Universalist World* <http://www.uuworld.org/2003/04/news2.html> (accessed 5 June, 2007).
- <sup>20</sup> "Beliefs Within Our Faith," Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, <http://uua.org/visitors/beliefswithin/index.shtml> (accessed June 13, 2007).
- <sup>21</sup> Booth, 11.
- <sup>22</sup> William F. Schulz, "Our Faith," *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, John Buehrens ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Harry C. Meserve, "Each Of Us Compiles His Own Bible," *Unitarian Universalist Views of the Bible* (Pamphlet. Ed. Gilbert A. Phillips. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Meserve.
- <sup>25</sup> Gilbert A. Phillips, ed., *Unitarian Universalist Views of the Bible* (Pamphlet. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 3-5, 8.
- <sup>26</sup> Rev. Robert A. Storer, ed., *Unitarian Universalist Views of God* (Pamphlet. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 3, 8-11.
- <sup>27</sup> Brandoch Lovely, ed., *Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus* (Pamphlet. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 9.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-6.
- <sup>29</sup> Booth, 17.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Mrs. Frederick Lipp, ed., *Unitarian Universalist Views of Church* (Pamphlet. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 4-6, 13.
- <sup>33</sup> Booth, 16.
- <sup>34</sup> Ada Barnett Stough, "The Entity," *Unitarian Universalist Views of Death and Immortality* (Pamphlet. Ed. Doris L. Pullen. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Doris L. Pullen, ed., *Unitarian Universalist Views of Death and Immortality* (Pamphlet. Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), 7-15.



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