



## Unitarians / Universalists

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Unitarian Universalism is a Protestant denomination that supports freedom of religious thought, rejects dogma in favor of reason, and incorporates humanistic values in its teachings. The modern day Unitarian Universalist church in the United States came about with the merging of the two former denominations in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. Historically, both denominations took progressive positions on the role of women and supported abolition of slavery and other social reforms. The combined denomination has been outspoken in support of human rights-- including, since 1970, those of sexual minorities.

### Universalism

Universalism arose in eighteenth-century England and America as a reaction to Calvinist doctrine that held that only a chosen few (the "elect") would be saved. Universalist ministers such as George de Benneville, who immigrated to America from Europe in 1741, and John Murray, who arrived from England in 1770, preached that salvation was attainable by all.

Universalism began as a movement within other Protestant denominations, notably Congregational and Baptist. It appealed to liberal thinkers such as Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In 1779 Murray and his followers established what was probably the first independent Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, which included a freed slave among its charter members.

### Unitarianism

Unitarianism's theological roots can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe, when religious leaders who dissented from the doctrine of the Trinity faced persecution. This doctrine, which asserts that God exists as three aspects--Father, Son, and Holy Ghost--was proclaimed as the only acceptable interpretation of God's nature in the fourth century C. E.

Some dissidents, such as Michael Servetus, found no basis for the Trinitarian view in scripture and affirmed instead the unity of God. Servetus was burned at the stake in 1553. However, congregations professing such "Unitarian" ideas began to be established in Transylvania. Poland provided a brief period of religious toleration in the latter half of the sixteenth century and anti-trinitarian ideas found expression there, particularly through the teachings of Faustus Socinus.

Socinian ideas became established in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though not without opposition. Scientist and minister Joseph Priestly (the discoverer of oxygen) advanced not only Unitarian ideas but also sympathized with the American Revolution, views that made him unpopular in England. He immigrated to the United States in 1794 and lectured at the Universalist Church in Philadelphia. His audience included Thomas Jefferson and other leaders of the new republic. In 1796 Priestly's influence helped lead to the founding of the first church in the United States with "Unitarian" in its name.



This Unitarian chapel in London first housed a congregation in 1708. This photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor Tarquin Binary appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License 2.5.

## **Religious Liberalism**

Universalist and Unitarian congregations spread throughout the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century. Both denominations stressed reliance on reason rather than on creeds or doctrinaire orthodoxy and welcomed insights from scientific research as well as from non-Christian philosophies. Unitarianism became associated with the Harvard Divinity School, Universalism with Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts.

In the United States members of both denominations championed the abolitionist cause prior to the Civil War, as well as women's suffrage, birth control, workers' rights, and reforms of prisons and mental health institutions.

In the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the son of a Unitarian minister and Unitarian-ordained himself, developed the Transcendentalist movement, which was both an extension of Unitarian ideas and a challenge to them. Olympia Brown, a leader in the women's suffrage movement, was ordained a Universalist minister in 1863, probably the first woman in the United States to be ordained by a mainline denomination.

Other notable Universalists and Unitarians include Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, Horace Greeley, Jane Addams, Albert Schweitzer, Adlai Stevenson, and Whitney Young.

In recent years opposition to the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, anti-racism efforts, global economic justice, peace in the Middle East, and the rights of indigenous people have been among the issues addressed by the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States, the Canadian Unitarian Council, and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in Britain.

## **Sexual Minority Concerns**

In the United States, active Unitarian Universalist support of the glbtq community dates from 1970, when the General Assembly passed a resolution to end discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals within the organization itself, and to promote positive attitudes toward all forms of sexuality. The denomination's acceptance of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people is consistent with its principle of actively affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

The church's Office of Gay Affairs was first funded in 1975, and eventually became the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns. A related membership organization, Interweave, brings Unitarian Universalist members of all persuasions together in support and advocacy.

In 1986 the AIDS Advisory Panel was formed, and a non-discrimination clause for HIV-positive employees was added to the denomination's personnel manual. Three years later, the General Assembly passed resolutions opposing discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS, supporting clean-needle programs, and condemning the Helms Amendment to restrict entry of HIV-infected people into the United States.

In 1992, the Unitarian Universalist Board of Trustees passed a resolution opposing discrimination against homosexuals and atheists by the Boy Scouts of America. In 1998, the Boy Scouts demanded that the Unitarians cease awarding religious medals. After a bitter dispute, in 1999 the Boy Scouts agreed to permit the Unitarians to resume awarding the medals, while the Unitarians agreed to remove its objections to discrimination from the "Religion in Life" manual that accompanies the religious medal program, but insisted on including them in pamphlets mailed along with the manual.

In 1993 the denomination endorsed the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Equal Rights and Liberation, and its board members participated in the march. That same year the General Assembly staged a public protest and candlelight vigil against North Carolina's "crime against nature" law.

In 1996 the Unitarian Universalist Association became the first mainline denomination in the United States formally to support legally recognized marriage between members of the same sex.

The denomination ordains openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual ministers and helps them find placement with congregations through its equal opportunity program, "Beyond Categorical Thinking." It has created curricular materials to help teach positive attitudes about homosexuality and bisexuality. It also provides Services of Union to lesbian and gay couples, and encourages members to promote positive and constructive approaches to populations affected by the AIDS epidemic.

In 1989 the Unitarian Universalist Association initiated a Welcoming Congregation program, which takes individual congregations through a process of examining attitudes and policies and changing them as needed to make them more accepting of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people.

To this end it produced *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook* in 1999. That year, Montana became the first state in which all Unitarian Universalist congregations had completed the process. The program is in effect in the Canadian Unitarian Council as well. By the year 2000, 25 percent of UUA churches in the United States had become Welcoming Congregations.

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### **About the Author**

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