

## **Unitarian Universalism: All Your Basic Heresies**

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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When I was young and growing up in a Unitarian Universalist religious education program, I distinctly remember hearing this mantra: The job of UU religious education is to provide the information with which you, when you are ready, will choose what is meaningful to you. I learned about the different religious traditions of the world, I was exposed to all the sacred texts, and I was taught to think for myself, although I have a feeling that I came directly out of the womb thinking for myself.

The point is, I was never told “This is what you must believe” either at church or at home. I always knew that someday, when I was ready, I would choose whether that church was the right one for me, and I also knew that the church’s by-laws would not let me sign the membership book until I was 16. I signed the membership book when I was 16. I chose Unitarian Universalism for myself. This is an extremely important difference between our tradition and those in which you are, at birth, of the same faith as your parents. It is our choice to insist on choice.

If you read the sermon description/blurb in the September newsletter for today, you will remember that the word heresy has to do with choice, not with having the wrong belief in the eyes of an arbitrary authority. I am sure that all through the ages, people must have disagreed about religious ideas, particularly the details. Why should we assume that human nature, and our propensity to have diverse viewpoints, was any different in past millennia? What WAS different (and actually is still the case in some places) was the danger of being banished, excommunicated, or even executed for a viewpoint that diverged. But diverse ideas were, and are still, always there, don’t you imagine? Perhaps long long ago diverse ideas were appreciated, I can’t say, but there have definitely been around 2000 years during which diversity has been suppressed, to say the least.

I believe that it has only been with the unique principles under which our country was formed that diversity found a safe haven. Particularly religious diversity. We are, today, the most religiously diverse nation on earth. Our constitution and its amendments opened the door, and two of the first diversities/choices/heresies to develop in this country were Unitarianism and Universalism.

Unitarianism split off theologically from Congregationalism, which had itself, over a few hundred years, come out of the Puritan/Calvinist tradition. Universalism was also a theological diversion from mainline Protestantism. The details of the history of our two progenitors are very interesting, but they are also very convoluted, and that history did not necessarily progress in anything resembling a linear fashion. The history of our merger is also one of stops and starts, and as you may already know, it was the Unitarian youth and the Universalist youth who led the way by example and officially joined their memberships well before the grown-ups could wrangle out the details of how the larger merger was to happen.

But this history, as interesting and as important to understand as it is, especially, perhaps, in order to effectively contemplate our future, is not our focus today. This morning I want to talk primarily about the heretical theological ideas our UU forbearers chose to embrace. Next week we'll explore the sometimes heretical choices we have made in the history of our worship style, as it differs from the traditions out of which we came and that surround us today. We'll talk about theological differences first, however, because theological differences often play into the differences in worship, certainly in the words and rituals we celebrate as UUs.

First of all, a bit of flawed logic that has been going around in my brain all week. If heresy means making choices for oneself, and if we all know from watching TV that choosy mothers choose Jif, then does it follow that mothers who choose Jif are heretics? That same suspect logic would lead us to also conclude that choosy people choose Unitarian Universalism. But in some sense I think this one is true. One of the books I suggest for those new to our Society and our Association is called A Chosen Faith, by John Buehrens and Forrest Church. They talk about this choosing that each of us has done in order to be here. It is something that makes us very different.

Not only, however, have we chosen to BE here, we also, as UUs, affirm and promote the unending search we are each on to learn, ponder, change our mind, and sometimes choose new spiritual and theological ideas. This is another significant choice that makes us different. We have no creed of required beliefs. Our understanding is that our religious journeys can, and probably should, continue till we no longer have the capacity for making any more choices. We are not a cafeteria style religion, and we do not hold that anything goes (because the concept of responsibility to the well being of community has to come in there somewhere), but we do agree that our search for our own truth is ongoing. There is a little quote I just heard that I really like, that speaks also to our ideas about revelation, which goes "I practice my religion the way my ancestors did – I make it up!" (remembered by the Rev. Elinor Artman, from Ashville, NC, from the time of the first revisions to our UU Principles)

We may not necessarily make it up from scratch, but we do choose, through various thoughtful processes, what will become our own thinking. We are *not* the following description of the traditional view: "Religion is a body of specific teachings and practices, won by a leap of faith and secured by strict adherence to the truth as it is revealed or taught." (A Chosen Faith, p. 10) This is our basic UU heresy, our insistence on choice. We will never have a creedal requirement.

What, though, are some of the classic theological heresies leading to the splits from other traditions of the Unitarians and the Universalists. I think you know most of them, but we shall review.

In the previous quote there is the phrase "the truth as it is revealed." The traditional or orthodox view is that revelation is rather sealed, and is found in the words of whatever sacred texts a tradition uses. The heretical view, ours, is that revelation is ongoing, and can be found in many places and by many means. William James wrote a book called The Varieties of Religious Experience. Think to yourself of all the different means by which you have found your own religious meaning and truth, some probably on purpose, some probably totally accidental. I will

be offering a series of sermons throughout the year on the variety of these sources and means, whether they are the religions of our birth or of the world, the time we spend in nature, or the epiphanies that come to us through beauty, the arts and music. Revelation happens...

A corollary to the heresy that revelation is not sealed up only in specific ancient words is our comfort with and appreciation of diversity. If we are each on our own path of revelatory experience, we're going to end up in different places, and that is an amazing thing with which to be comfortable. I say amazing because if you look at many traditional religions there is little in-house comfort or appreciation of different beliefs. I think of the many stories I hear from you about the reaction you got when you tried to ask questions as a child of another faith.

Yes, today there are other denominations in addition to ours that are very accepting and open minded, but even the liberal Congregational church (now UCC) was not always that way – otherwise the Unitarians would not have had to leave when they decided they didn't care to have to profess a belief in the trinity any more. It is amazing, and somewhat counter to human nature, to be comfortable with pluralism and diversity. Even UUs cannot always succeed at acceptance and radical hospitality to the degree to which we aspire, but I think we are amazing for trying. We have made the choice to try to do things a different way.

I just mentioned the major Unitarian heresy: non-adherence to the doctrine of the trinity. Unitarians like to claim this heresy back to the early years of Christian formation, when there were many ideas about the identity of the man called Jesus floating about. A particular man in the fourth century named Arius was well known for his views on the humanity of Jesus, but he and his supporters were outvoted at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 C.E. when the official view became that of the Catholic religion, that Jesus is the totally divine son of God, merely made manifest in human form to bring a message to human beings. That God was one entity, and not of three parts, was the basic, and first, Unitarian heresy.

That God could not be the kind of god that could condemn anyone to eternal damnation in hell, and that all people are saved in the eyes of a benevolent God, became the basic, and first, Universalist heresy. This idea, as with the idea of the non-divinity of Jesus, were thoughts that popped up continually over the last 2000 years, and were the early seeds from which our UU choices have become possible. But, as I mentioned earlier, for the most part these early heretical ideas did not become large and lasting movements. Heresies were silenced remarkably effectively. Michael Servetus, author of a treatise called *On The Errors of the Trinity*, was burned at the stake, along with what Calvin hoped were all his books, not all that long ago in 1553. They missed a few books.

I have mentioned the original theological differences that created the Unitarians and the Universalists. Early on, however, both continued to affirm their Christian identity, despite these rather major differences. Soon, the Universalists also took the idea of god-is-one-not-three to their own hearts, sealing our eventual merger some years before it actually happened in 1961.

Unitarianism and Universalism continued to change once they had made what might be called their "opening statements" of divergence from the traditional. These changes were mostly gradual, and when change came it was not always easy. Unitarian Theodore Parker's 1841

sermon on “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity” caused much indignation, even within the Unitarian community. But it planted the seeds of a major split from the organization of Christianity by those who would practice the permanent message of Jesus without the rigid creeds and requirements of Orthodoxy. Parker’s other radical idea was that Jesus’ message could be discerned through more than the person of Jesus. Parker preached that these messages could “spring up spontaneous in the holy heart.” (Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism, by Mark Harris, p. 359)

Parker was a powerful orator, sometimes preaching to crowds of 3000 people at a time (they had to use a Music Hall) and his congregation numbered near 7000. Unitarians, including Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, were a significant force in the early religious, cultural, and civic history of Boston and New England!

Theodore Parker’s sermon on “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity” is hailed as one of the three most influential sermons in Unitarian history. The others were by William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they were all controversial. Many other Unitarian ministers snubbed Parker, for example, and refused to exchange pulpits with him after that famous sermon. Along with Emerson, Parker “insisted that the religious impulse is primary and universal and that Christianity is but one of many expressions of that primary impulse.” (Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism, p. 4) “For Parker, the beauty and greatness of the religion of Jesus lay in its reaffirmation of the primary and essential truths of all religion.” (p. 35) When I get to more of the Universalist theological evolution, remember this idea of Parker’s, for the two faiths were moving in some very parallel directions.

These thoughts about things like an inborn religious impulse and universal essential truths were for those times quite revolutionary and heretical thoughts that, although they seem so obvious and acceptable now, were only absorbed into mainstream Unitarian thought and belief over time and with some difficulty.

William Ellery Channing lived from 1780 to 1842. “His sermons from the pulpit of the Federal Street Church in Boston were a principle force behind the separation of Unitarianism from Calvinism. Channing gave voice to the supreme dignity of human nature, was an unflinching advocacy of the free mind, and a mystical sense of imminent divinity,” that the divine is in residence within all that is. (Harris, p. 95) I would say these are, again, ideals to which we pay great and sincere respect as Unitarian Universalists almost 200 years later. The first of our seven principles uses the phrase “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Right from Channing!

There were many significant theological changes taking place in those years: the rejection of the Calvinistic doctrines of depravity, election and eternal damnation, the insistence that reason and scholarship (methods of Biblical criticism were just coming into play) were essential for our spiritual discernment, (these were from Channing), and that each of us could experience for ourselves immediate intuitions of that divinity. This last, you may recognize, is direct from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the major force behind the Transcendentalist movement. One example of the struggle going on within the Unitarian movement during these times is the response to Emerson’s idea of spiritual philosophy (in contrast to the old Unitarian school of empirical philosophy) was posed in the question “But if the spiritual or ‘transcendentalist’ school should

prevail and the truths of Christianity be regarded as valid only so far as they correspond to direct intuitions of absolute truth, Jesus would lose his function as the unique channel of divine revelation, and the miracles wrought in confirmation of this authority would shrink into triviality.” (Three Prophets..., p. 33-34) Emerson wrote that conversion to Christianity (remember, Unitarianism still identified that way) was by “the reception of beautiful sentiments, never by miracle.” (p. 3) It appears to have been a big deal back then for the Unitarians to begin to dismiss the Biblical miracles, and I have to admit that growing up never having believed in the miracles, I find this resistance puzzling.

Lest you think the Unitarians were the only ones experiencing growth pains (or perhaps they should at that point still be referred to as the traumas of birth), the Universalists were having their own internal disputes.

Part of what is called the Winchester Profession of Faith, the central statement of Universalist belief created in 1803, read “We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.” (Harris, p. 523) But there ensued years of argument about whether someone who had sinned on earth would spend time in a purgatory type place for a while before going to Heaven, or whether all people went directly to Heaven. Much agonizing went into worrying that if all was forgiven immediately upon ones’ death, why would anyone behave?

Interestingly, and I believe a premonition, perhaps, of our independent congregational identities, is that the Winchester Profession of the Universalists had a “Liberty Clause” which enabled “individual societies to adopt articles of faith that fit their own circumstances.” (p. 513) Universalists already had a strong sense of religious freedom and the right of private judgment and the passing of confining declarations of faith was painful for them.

I already mentioned that the Universalists became themselves the first union of the unitarian and universalist theologies with the help of the ideas of Hosea Ballou in 1805. This is referred to as Phase two in the history of Universalist theology. “Phase two was thus a fully Unitarian Universalism with the stress no longer on the after-life, but simply on the constancy of the divine benevolence in all stages of creation and on an uncalculating human benevolence in response to the divine plenitude of purpose.” (American Universalism by George Huntston Williams, p. 4)

Universalism entered another phase in the late 1800s and early 1900s, with the idea of Universalism as “world religion.” “Here, then,” wrote Dr. Tracy Pullman in 1904, “is a suggested pattern of a new religion. It is greater than Christianity because it is an evolutionary religion, because it is universal rather than partial, because it is one with the spirit of science and is primarily interested in bringing out that which is God-like in man.” (Williams, p. 77)

This somewhat fleeting idea that Universalism could be the global world religion of the future eventually morphed into an emphasis on the universality of some aspects of all religions. Again, these were and are both radical and heretical concepts.

Have we covered all our basic heresies? Well, not quite.

Today, due to the influences of scientific revelations, and the significant humanist philosophies that came in to prominence in the early 1930s, many if not most Unitarian Universalists now do not even believe in God, at least not the God of the early Unitarians and Universalists. This is a pretty big heresy according to a lot of people in this country, from what I can tell. But it is one of our Unitarian Universalist choices, and I am personally glad for that choice. As we have come to know but many still cannot accept, one need not believe in God to be a good person.

And so, my fellow heretics, let us be proud that these two traditions, the Unitarians and the Universalists, have had the courage and the fortitude to survive first martyrdom, then stigma, and to this day, relegation to the list of denominations not welcome at the National Council of Churches. To some we aren't a religion at all, but merely a sect.

We remain heretics for yet a while longer, and I say "Blessings on us all."

As a diversion from our usual habit of an immediate hymn at this point, I offer instead a few minutes for quiet personal reflection. Then we will sing.