

Unitarian-Universalist Association (UUA)

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The Unitarian-Universalist Association (UUA) consists of two movements in American religious history that combined in the mid-twentieth century. “Unitarianism” takes its name from its opposition to historic Christianity’s doctrine of the Trinity. “Universalism” is the belief that all people will be saved.

Founders:

Unitarianism. European roots: Michael Servetus (1511-1553); Faustus Socinius (1539-1604); John Biddle 1615-1662); Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808). America: Rev. John Mayheu (1720-1766); Henry Ware (1764-1845); William Ellery Channing (1780-1842); Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

Universalism. John Murray (1741-1815); Hosea Ballou (1771-1852).

Statistics:

Membership worldwide: 211,597 in 1034 congregations.

History:

Unitarianism. Europe: The Radical Reformation of the 16th century sowed the seeds of Unitarianism. Michael Servetus (1511-1553) is believed to be the founder of this movement, presenting Unitarian views in his *On the Errors of the Trinity in Seven Books* (1531) and *The Reconstitution of Christianity* (1546). Italian Faustus Socinius (1539-1604) spread Unitarianism (also called Socinianism) in Poland, where he established the Minor Reformed Church in Poland. John Biddle and Theophilus Lindsey spread Unitarianism throughout England. Lindsey established the Unitarian Essex Street Chapel (Benjamin Franklin would visit there when business brought him to England).

- America: Kings Chapel in Boston became the first church in America (officially) to advocate Unitarianism, which subsequently spread throughout New England. Prominent Unitarians were: John Mayheu, the first minister openly to oppose the Trinity; Henry Ware, first Unitarian appointed President of Harvard Divinity School in 1805; William Ellery Channing, one of the most eloquent and famous of the Unitarians (along with Ralph Waldo Emerson). Channing’s sermon “Unitarian Christianity” (1819) and

Emerson's Harvard "Divinity School Address" (1837) did much to advance the cause of Unitarianism in 19th century America.

- *Universalism.* John Murray, a Methodist turned Universalist, founded the First Universalist Church in America called the "Independent Christian Church" (Gloucester, MA) in 1779. Hosea Ballou proclaimed that the whole human race was "elect." Universalism incorporated humanist thought in the early 20th century, leading to the view that it is not even necessary to believe in God's existence. The humanist tradition advocated complete freedom of thought, the main ingredient of the UUA today—though in 1980 the word "secular" found a place in the UUA to distinguish non-religious from religious universalists.
- In 1959 the Unitarians and the Universalists combined to form one organization, the UUA, headquartered in Boston, MA. "Unitarians strongly influenced the Universalists; references to Christ's atoning death disappeared. While the Unitarians declared that man was too good to be damned, the Universalists avowed that God was too good to damn man."¹ The UUA is perhaps the most liberal religious body in America.

Texts:

The UUA considers all sacred texts of every religious tradition as sources of truth. Reason, tolerance, and freedom are guarded as the most sacred of all authorities. *World Journal*, featuring dimensions of UUA life and reporting UUA news; *Connections*, a bi-monthly denominational newsletter.

Beliefs and Practices:

- One of the "creeds" of the UUA is that there are no creeds. UUA in principle rejects the notion that truth is fixed or expressible in the form of credal statements.
- Unitarian Universalists may believe that Jesus is divine, as they believe all people to be divine, but He is not believed to be God. He is believed to be a man, a religious leader and Messiah. He is honored along with figures such as Moses and Buddha as an inspired teacher.
- Though UUA "teachings" are difficult to summarize, the following emphases are present: openness to all things; the desire to overcome evil with good; the seeking of justice for all; toleration of all religions because there is wisdom to be learned from each; encouragement to love our neighbors as ourselves; trust in reason and science; and inherent dignity and worth of every human being.
- While the principle of tolerance would seem to preclude outreach by the UUA, militant Unitarian Scott Alexander in his book *Salted with Fire* reflects a UUA desire to expand through "evangelism."
- The UUA has taken liberal positions on social/ethical issues. Olympia Borwn ordained in 1863, was the first female Unitarian Universalist minister. Now nearly 60% of UUA

¹ August Kimme, "Universalism," *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 3:2430.

ministers are women.² It was the first denomination to ordain homosexuals into the ministry. The General Assembly accepted a “right-to-die” resolution in 1988. Same-sex marriages were first performed in the UUA in 1984 and in 1996 the UUA became the first denomination to advocate same-sex marriages.³

- Paganism was accepted as a legitimate belief system in 1985.

A Lutheran Response

The UUA’s assumption that there is no definitive truth is contrary to the Lutheran conviction that the Scriptures are the very Word of God and thus contain divinely normative truth—a claim that the biblical writers make of their own writings (1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). This confidence, it must be emphasized, does not rest on a prior use of human reason or logic to establish the veracity of the Bible. Rather, it is a conviction produced by a hearing of the Gospel (the chief topic of the Bible) and issuing as a fruit of faith in Jesus Christ who Himself revealed that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). It should be noted that from a Lutheran perspective the UUA’s claim of tolerance contains an internal contradiction. To maintain that everything is to be tolerated and at the same time to hold that Christianity is wrong for believing that everything is not to be tolerated, is to say that at least one thing is not to be tolerated, namely, Christianity.

It is understandable that a belief system rejecting divinely given, normative truth would likewise reject moral prescriptions given in the Bible (e.g., the prohibition of homosexual behavior) and advocate a relativist approach to social questions of moral import. Lutherans hold, however, that God expresses His will in statements that require obedience from His creatures (e.g., prohibition against taking human life, including that of the unborn), a principle upheld and taught by Jesus (Matt. 5:17-48) and His apostles.

On the basis of the biblical revelation Lutherans confess, together with Christians of all ages, that the true God of the Bible is the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Lutherans confess the Athanasian Creed that concludes its confession of the Triune God by affirming, “Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved.”

For Further Reading

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² Laurie Carter Noble, “Olympia Brown: Pioneering Minister, Women’s Suffragist,” uuworld.org, Summer 2013 <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/285554.shtml>.

³ Alan Gomes, *Unitarian Universalist Association*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 20.

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Links and Websites

www.uua.org/main.html

www.uua.org/info/origins.html

www.uua.org/icuu