
What is unique and distinctive about the Unitarian approach to religion? Some of the best answers can be found in the six sources of our living tradition:

- 1** Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.
- 2** Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.
- 3** Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.
- 4** Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves.
- 5** Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- 6** Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Defining Ourselves

What is Unitarianism? Curtis Reese, an early 20th century Humanist, said that "historically the basic content of liberal religion is spiritual freedom." As Unitarians and Universalists, we insist on the right of defining our own beliefs.

If there is a currently official expression of Unitarianism, it is our statement of Principles and Sources. It identifies Six Sources of our Living Tradition. These sources are a good place to start in explaining Unitarianism. Our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, is organized in terms of them. The sources bring to mind some of the things that are unique about the Unitarian path. They speak of our pluralism and our history.

Being pluralists means that we are happy to draw on many spiritual sources – not just one sacred book. It means that there is no single Unitarian religious identity. Such pluralism is mirrored in our history. Unitarian history is a story of a variety of movements – from the original Unitarian Christians, to Transcendentalists like Emerson, to the Religious Humanists and so on. It is a story of continuous evolution, with each development adding new spiritual sources to the mix. Our tradition has evolved – from Calvinism, to liberal Christianity, to a movement in which even science-minded atheists and Goddess-worshipping Pagans have a place in the circle. Very often the radicals of one generation have come to be regarded as classic Unitarians by their successors.

Unitarian Christianity

The faith of the original Unitarians was rooted in the "Jewish and Christian teachings" of the Bible (source #4). The origins of Unitarian Christianity can be traced back to the Reformation. In North America, it arose out of a liberal movement within the Puritan churches of New England. The liberals took a sunny view of human nature and emphasized the role of reason in interpreting scripture. Their orthodox opponents made an issue of their rejection of the Trinity, and labelled them Unitarians. The liberal Christians were not all that eager to found a new sect. It was only when the orthodox forced the issue that the Puritan churches split, with the liberals forming the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

Our subsequent history is a story of the gradual acceptance of new sources while jettisoning much of the doctrinal content of Christianity, until little more was left of it than the belief in a higher power and the injunction to love our neighbour. Along the way there were various controversies, with conservatives wanting to define Unitarianism in strictly Christian terms, and radicals wanting to push the envelope of religious freedom. In 1867, some of the radicals even felt the need to form their own Free Religious Association. According to the *Fifty Affirmations* of the radicals:

The fellowship of Christianity is limited by the Christian Confession...The fellowship of Free Religion is universal and free...The practical work of Christianity is to Christianize the world, to convert all souls to the Christ...The practical work of Free Religion is to humanize the world, to make the individual nobler here and now.

Although supported by a small minority in their own time, the principles of Free Religion eventually won out over those of sectarian Christianity within our movement.

Direct Experience

Another source of Unitarianism is the "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder" (source #1). The prominence of this source owes a lot to the Transcendentalists, a group of ministers and writers that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. Emerson upheld the value of personal religious experience in a way that led him to undercut the special authority of the Bible. In his Divinity School Address (1838), he said that we should not think of revelation as something long ago given and done, as if God were dead. Rather, our age is in need of its own revelations. Instead of putting our faith in miracles — the special intervention of God in events — he bid us to appreciate the mystery and wonder in the everyday course of nature. For Unitarians, there is nothing necessarily supernatural about religious experience, and no reason why "spirituality" cannot refer simply to the human spirit.

Prophetic Women and Men

Source #2 reflects Unitarian concern with social action and reform. It refers to "words and deeds of prophetic women and men." The word "prophetic" here invokes the example of the Old Testament prophets, who spoke out for justice and against the powers that be. Such a focus began to emerge among 19th century liberal Protestants with the social gospel movement.

Among Unitarians, a fine exemplar of this source was a New York City minister by the name of John Haynes Holmes. He wanted to shift the focus of

religion from God to humanity, and from the individual soul to the community. He helped establish the American Civil Liberties Union, took an unpopular stand against World War I, and was a great admirer of Gandhi. For many of us, Gandhi and Martin Luther King represent what it means to confront powers of evil - not self-righteously, in a spirit of bitterness and revenge, but "with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love."

Humanist Teachings

Source #5 is Humanism, which only became influential among Unitarians in the 20th century, although its roots go back to Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment. A large number of Canadian fellowships were founded by Humanist-oriented Unitarians in the 1950's. Humanism counsels us "to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science," and warns us "against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

For Humanists, it is important to affirm independent thinking and encourage people to "cherish their doubts." One of the most unfortunate aspects of biblical religion is its message that doubt is sinful. Thus, Father Abraham is held up as a hero of faith because he blindly accepted the word of Jehovah and was willing to sacrifice his son (Gen 22). And in the *New Testament*, "doubting Thomas" is ridiculed because he would not believe until he had touched the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands (Jn 20). Such teachings are opposed to the spirit of science and critical thinking.

Source #5 also warns us against idol-

atry. For those Sunday-schooled in the *Old Testament* (Hebrew Bible), the word "idolatry" may bring to mind images of heathens worshipping a golden calf. However, the term has been redefined by modern liberal theologians. For Paul Tillich, faith is idolatrous when it fixes on something partial, worshipping it to the exclusion of all other expressions of the ultimate. An example of such partial devotion is the attitude of many fundamentalists to their Bibles, which one might call "bibliolatry." However, even such things as Reason, Science, and Social Justice may become idols if one defines them narrowly and demands the sacrifice of all other values in their name. Idolatry in this sense urges us to equate one narrow ideology with the Word of God.

The Unitarian tradition, on the other hand, offers us many sources to draw upon. The challenge it leaves us with is not one of crusading for the triumph of light over darkness, but of finding a way to balance a variety of ideals.

Alternative Spiritualities

What about "wisdom from the world's religions" and "spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions" (sources #3 and #6)? It is only in the last few decades that these have made a major impact on Unitarianism. Our movement has long attracted people looking for an alternative to traditional Christianity. Until the 1960's, the main alternative to Biblical religion seemed to be reason and science. A large number of those seeking a home in our congregations were skeptics and atheists. Humanism came to be the leading outlook among Unitarians.

More recently there has arisen an increasing hunger for alternative modes of

spirituality. Hence there are now growing numbers of Unitarian Buddhists and Unitarian Pagans. The appeal of Pagan or Earth-based spirituality is now second only to Humanism. Ultimately, if religious liberals are to develop a vital and compelling alternative to old-time religion, we must draw on both head and heart, reason and ritual, science and poetry. From a UU Pagan perspective, Margot Adler writes:

I guess I chose UUism because I need to live in balance. I can do all those wonderful, earth-centered spiritual things: sing under the stars, drum for hours, create moving ceremonies for the changes of the seasons or the passage of time in the lives of men and women. But I also need to be a worldly, down-to-earth person in a complicated world — someone who believes oppression is real, that tragedies happen, that chaos happens, that not everything is for a purpose...I love the fact that Unitarian Universalists have a good many atheists and humanists among them...And I think, in turn, the Pagan community has brought to UUism the joy of ceremony and a lot of creative and artistic ability that will leave the denomination with a richer liturgy and a bit more juice and mystery.

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Sources of Unitarianism

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