

Unitarian Universalist Theology Sparks Module

ONLINE VERSION PARTICIPANT GUIDE



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About the Authors

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the technical and editorial assistance of Alicia LeBlanc, Ministerial Credentialing Administrator, in producing the module documents and, especially, the online presence!

About the Editors

The Rev. Emily DeTar Birt currently serves at the Unitarian Church of Staten Island as a consulting minister. Emily also works as the Community Coordinator for a queer-centered, queer-led worshipping community called Not So Churchy under the Rev. Mieke Vandersall. Emily has a passion for Unitarian Universalist faith and theologies and has taught this curriculum several times. She is grateful for the opportunity to co-edit this edition and continue sharing in her love for Unitarian Universalism.

The Rev. Kimberly Quinn Johnson serves as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork, on Long Island in Bridgehampton, NY. She earned an M.Div. from Meadville Lombard Theological School in 2015. Kimberly serves on the Organizing Collective Board for BLUU (Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism), is a member of the Steering Committee for UU Class Conversations, and is on the Board of Trustees of the UU Women's Federation. She also serves as vice-president of the St. Lawrence Foundation for Theological Education. She gets to work at the nexus of faith formation, youth ministry, and racial justice as a Program Leader with the UU College of Social Justice.

Jessica Laikeman serves as the Director of Lifespan Faith Formation at Boulder Valley UU Fellowship and serves our UUA as the Camping Ministries Director for the Pacific Western Region. Jessica is a lifelong UU and has served as a religious educator in UU congregations for over ten years. She is grateful to have worked with the Rev. Emily DeTar Birt recently facilitating this curriculum and is honored to be included as a co-editor.

Introduction to the Module

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Theology [Sparks module](#). Theology is traditionally thought of as the study of the nature of God and religious truth, and in this program, we consider theology broadly to include the study of belief and meaning. A central task of any Unitarian Universalist religious education program is to help people of all ages develop their own understanding of central human questions such as *What am I called to do with my life? What is evil and how do I respond? What is the biggest thing to which I belong?* The answers a person gives to any of these big questions may change over time and will be based not only in that person's experience, but also in the wisdom they gather through the ages.

In this module, religious professionals explore several key theologies and theologians from our Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist heritages, as well as influences from other traditions. It asks participants to engage with the views presented and offer their own considered viewpoints. This program, then, invites religious professionals into both a deeper knowledge of our liberal religious heritage and a more profound understanding of their own beliefs, thereby equipping them to help others on their theological journeys.

A Note from the Editors

As the Unitarian Universalist Association continues to confront white supremacy within the systems and structures of our denomination and faith, an examination of how we talk about our Unitarian Universalist theology is vital. Similar to other Western faith traditions, we have historically lauded white cisgender male voices as the heroes or writers of our shared Unitarian

Universalist history and theology. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color) UUs have always been molders, shakers and theologians of our Unitarian Universalist faith. With new editions to this curriculum, it is our hope as editors that we not only showcase the diverse voices that have made up the threads of our theologies, but also expand our definition of theology itself. We attempt to shift the focus away from singular exemplars of theology, to looking at the wider context from which our faith emerged. As you will read in “Widening the Circle of Concern,”

Because we have not updated our theology, the history we know privileges the dominant culture and those voices that were preserved in our history and written record. We now have a chance to embrace a more inclusive and accurate history (COIC Report, 14).

We hope that these changes are a small start for a more accurate and inclusive accounting of history.

Participant Requirements

This module is an online learning experience comprised of six two-hour live sessions with reading and assignments to be completed before each session. Credit will be offered for full participation in the module. Full participation includes:

- **Attendance.** Participants are expected to attend each of the online sessions.
- **Reading.** Reading, reflection, and activities to prepare for each session, which will require about two - three hours per session. All readings are included in the pdfs for each session,

so there is no need to purchase any reading materials. If you wish, you can purchase or borrow the book, which has two essays included in the readings, [*A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*](#), John Gibb Millspaugh, ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009).

- **Discussion.** Each session's preparation includes questions for reflection on the readings which will form the basis for discussion. Participants are expected to be fully prepared to participate in online discussions after reflecting on the questions, perhaps in a journal.
- **Written assignments.** In addition to completing the reading assigned for a session, participants are to reflect on the readings and discussions for each session, noting what struck them most. Participants are asked to share it with the group in written form (roughly 250 words) in the session's online discussion forum. At the end of the module, each participant will have generated a variety of ideas for sharing UU theology in your work. Assuming two weeks between webinars, participants should post in the discussion forum during the week after each session so that they can devote the following week to reading and preparing for the next session.
- **Project.** A final project and presentation that shows a way to use in your professional work what you have learned about Unitarian Universalist theology.

Technical Requirements

Participants and leaders must have a computer with reliable Internet connection and a video camera to fully participate in online sessions. Headsets provide better audio quality; tablets and

smart phones are not recommended. The module also requires the use of a shared document program such as Google Docs or Dropbox.

Module Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- Develop a sense of the broad scope of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist theology and become familiar with some of the theologians and thought leaders, historical and modern, who have contributed to Unitarian Universalist thought.
- Understand some of both Unitarian and Universalist theological foundations of Unitarian Universalism.
- Understand significant theological movements such as Transcendentalism, Humanism, Process Theology, and Liberation Theology that have shaped our contemporary religious movement.
- Develop and articulate your own point of view on key theological questions.
- Apply theological understandings to real-life liturgical and educational forums to help people of all ages explore theological questions.
- Nurture a theology of justice and service in individuals and congregations.
- Understand the context of theology within an anti-racist and multi-cultural lens, as well as be able to unpack some of the white cis-heteronormative structures that have been passed down through different theologies.

Reading

Each session features several readings, as well as a variety of brief quotations. All readings are included in the pdfs for each session, so there is no need to purchase any reading materials. If you wish, you can purchase or borrow the book, which has two essays included in the readings, [*A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*](#), John Gibb Millspaugh, ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009).

Assignments

In addition to completing the reading assigned for a session, participants are to reflect on the readings and discussions for each session, noting what struck them most. Participants are asked to share it with the group in written form (roughly 250 words) in the session's online discussion forum. At the end of the module, each participant will have generated a variety of ideas for sharing UU theology in your work. Assuming two weeks between webinars, participants should post in the discussion forum during the week after each session so that they can devote the following week to reading and preparing for the next session.

Find Out More

Each session concludes with a list of books, articles, and websites for further exploration. These may be particularly helpful for your final project.

Final Project

Participants will prepare a final project that shows a way to use what you have learned about Unitarian Universalist theology in your professional work, working alone or as a group of up to

four people. An individual project should take eight to ten minutes to present; a group project should take 15-20 minutes.

To seek ideas for the final project, participants may review ideas for applying learning that have been shared over the course of the module and review the resources in each session's "Find Out More" section. The project can be a development of an idea from the group's collection or something entirely new. Any electronic format may be used in presentation, for example, a slide show/PowerPoint; uploaded or screen-shared documents or flyers; video; audio; and shares from Pinterest, Tumblr, or a blog site are all possibilities. Participants should submit a project proposal to the module leaders for approval two weeks before the final session. Leaders may offer suggestions or request revisions in your plan. Participants will be asked to post their final projects in a shared folder by a date before the start of the final session.

Pre-Module Assignment

Introductions

“We arrive out of many singular rooms,” writes Unitarian Universalist minister Kenneth Patton in a responsive reading, #443 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Each person in this group brings a unique set of experiences, skills and interests to our common endeavor. A week before the first meeting, post a self-introduction in the Session 1 Discussion Forum, including your current involvement with religious leadership, your location, and anything else that will help the group to get to know you better. Additionally, you should share a brief statement of your own (current) theology.

Opening and Closing Words

Leaders will select opening and closing words for Sessions One and Six. For the remainder of the sessions, participants are asked to volunteer to share opening or closing words of your choosing, preferably related to session themes. The leaders will post a sign-up sheet online, in the folder designated for shared documents. Two helpful resources are the UUA’s online [WorshipWeb](#) and [Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition](#), published in 2015.

Session Preparation

Complete the reading for each session. Prepare to participate in online discussions by reflecting on the questions, perhaps in a journal.

Session One: What Is Theology?

Introduction

What is theology, and why might a person want to engage it? In particular, why might a Unitarian Universalist want to engage it? At its most literal, theology is words (logos) about God (theos). More broadly, theology is how we talk about the distinctly religious questions of life:

- What, if anything, is God?
- What is our purpose on this earth?
- Why do bad things happen?
- Where are we headed?
- What is the nature of humanity?
- What do we owe to one another?
- How are we connected?
- How do we know right from wrong?

The usefulness of these kinds of questions for religious professionals would seem obvious. If we are going to help children, youth, and adults in their lifelong journeys toward spiritual maturity, our work will address these questions. If we are doing this work as Unitarian Universalists, we need to understand how our faith tradition has grappled with these questions over time.

It is common for children and newcomers to Unitarian Universalism to ask, *What do UUs believe?* Of course, there is no single answer, but this question deserves a thoughtful, informed response. As a non-creedal religion, we have a rich, dynamic liberal faith tradition. There are significant ways in which Unitarian Universalists have parted company with our religious siblings, and there

are beliefs and values that have become strong and colorful threads in the tapestry of our common religious life. Familiarity with these significant threads is an important part of the complicated answer to the question of what Unitarian Universalists believe.

UU theology is not only about what has come down to us from the past. Unitarian Universalist theology is fluid and is informed by each one of us. Consequently, it is important for religious professionals not only to be comfortable explaining the significant threads of our history, but also to have grappled with the questions and found some answers, however provisional.

Unitarian Universalist theology, like all theology, is both a system of thought and a system of teaching. In this course, we will not only be exploring different theological resources, but also different ways faith has been taught over time. The pedagogy we use to teach faith has theological assumptions and structures within it. As you read of new ways of doing religious education and of teaching religion, notice the theology behind it. We will talk more about this as we explore famous theologians and educators, like William Ellery Channing, Sophia Lyon Fahs, Joseph Jordan, and Paolo Friere.

This Theology Sparks Module both shares some theological threads of our Unitarian and Universalist heritages and weaves into our faith tapestry the strands of each participant's own insights, struggles, and lived experience. You will read words by and about some of the people who have significantly shaped Unitarian Universalism, explore influences from other traditions, share your own thoughts and beliefs, and develop opportunities to contribute to the theological growth of the people you serve.

SESSION ONE READINGS

Reading 1: Understanding Theology

“Understanding Theology,” sermon excerpt, by Rev. Jenn Crow, Wellspring Program, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY (October 2006).

Reading 2: Our Theological Diversity

“The Ground on Which We Meet,” in *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, (UUA Commission on Appraisal, 2005).

Reading 3: Theology from Widening Our Circle of Concern

“Theology,” in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, (UUA Commission on Institutional Change, 2020).

Reading 4: Our Theological House

“Our Theological House,” by Rebecca Parker, in *A House for Hope*, Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Session One: What is Theology?

Use these reflection questions to guide your reading. They will provide the basis for the session discussions.

- What is your most important theological question right now? Has it been different at other times in your life?
- What are some instances in which you have engaged in theological learning with your community or with yourself?

- Which do you think is most vital to Unitarian Universalism: our diversity or our similarities? Why?
- Rebecca Parker first introduced the metaphor of the theological house at the October 2003 Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) Fall Conference “The Theology of Religious Education”. How does this “hope-filled religious framework” resonate in today’s political and cultural climate?

Session Two: Early Unitarianism and Universalism

Introduction



If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he [the Son] had his substance from nothing. —Arius, (c. 250 CE-336 CE), Presbyter of Alexandria and founder of the heresy known as Arianism

I do not separate Christ from God more than a voice from the speaker or a beam from the sun. Christ is the voice of the speaker. He and the Father are the same thing, as the beam and the light, are the same light. —Michael Servetus (Miguel Serveto) (c.1506-1553) Spanish physician, theologian and martyr



Q. What is the rule of conduct for Christians?

A. They will endeavour that benevolence should guide their every action, virtue will be the principle of their lives, betwixt man and man, they will deal with equity, they will not judge, they will not set at nought their brother, but they will do unto others, as they would they should do unto

them, and they will be solicitous, at all times, to set a guard upon the door of their lips.

Q. Who will they consider as their brother?

A. They cannot avoid considering all mankind as brethren, for the same breath of God animates them, they are descended from the same stock, and redeemed by the same Emmanuel. —Judith Sargent Murray, Universalist Catechism, 1782

The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship, even as we appreciate and accept with gratitude the differences that tend to unite the male and female of all species. We do not find those differences obstacles to love. —George de Benneville (1703-1793)



We are able to discern not only what we already are, but what we may become, to see in ourselves germs and promises of a growth to which no bounds can be set, to dart beyond what we have actually gained to the idea of perfection as the end of our being. —William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), Unitarian minister, from the essay “Self-Culture”

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace. —Hosea Ballou (1771-1852), most influential of the preachers in the second generation of the Universalist movement in America



We have all of us, whether rich or poor, whether high or low, of whatever nationality and religious conviction, the same supreme necessities and the same great problem and infinity of love. This old world has rolled on through countless stages and phases of physical progress until it is the home of humanity, and it has, through a process of evolution or growth reached an era of intellectual and spiritual development where there is 'malice toward none and charity toward all,' and when, without prejudice, without fear, and in perfect fidelity, we may clasp hands across the chasm of our differences and speed and cheer each other on in the ways of all that is good and true. —Augusta Jane Chapin (1836-1905), Universalist minister and educator

To determine the beginnings of a Unitarian theology is no simple matter. Some people would claim Jesus as a Unitarian, in the sense of believing in the unity of God, as opposed to the trinity. Certainly European theologians such as Arius, Socinus, and Servetus held views counter to those

of the Trinitarian Christians. However, Unitarianism in the United States developed out of a liberalizing movement within the Standing Order Congregational churches in New England. This liberal movement was clearly articulated for the first time in 1819, in William Ellery Channing's famous sermon given in Baltimore for the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks, an address often referred to simply as the Baltimore Sermon. Channing is frequently referred to as "the father of American Unitarianism."

Universalism, the belief that all souls will attain salvation, was the foundational belief for the Protestant group that became known as the Universalists. John Murray was not the first to promote the belief in universal salvation in the United States, but his influence as a preacher and institution builder was foundational in the creation of the Universalist church. Hosea Ballou's Universalist theology branched out from Murray's belief in the redemption of Christ for all people to a broader faith that a loving God would want to "happify" all of God's beloved children. The official denominational organization, the Universalist Church of America, was founded in 1825, the same year as the American Unitarian Association. Both of these theological traditions have had leaders of color since their inception. We name some of their founding voices here, as we consider the breadth of our theological heritage.

SESSION TWO READINGS

Reading 1: Story: The Baltimore Sermon

"Story: The Baltimore Sermon," from *UU History, Faith like a River: Themes from Unitarian Universalist History*, by Alison Cornish and Jackie Clement (Workshop 9 UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2011).

Reading 2: Unitarian Christianity by William Ellery Channing

“Unitarian Christianity,” by William Ellery Channing, Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in the First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819.

Reading 3: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

“Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,” in *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, Mark Morrison-Reed (Skinner House Books, 2011).

Reading 4: We Are All Bound Up Together

“We Are All Bound Up Together,” Excerpt of Speech by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1866) from blackpast.org.

Reading 5: John Murray's Conversion to Universalism

“John Murray's Conversion to Universalism,” by Kimberly French in *UU World* (2009).

Reading 6: Universalist Manifesto

“Universalist Manifesto,” by Charles Howe in *UU World* (2005).

PEDAGOGY POINT

In 1811, Unitarian ministers and lay leaders in Boston began to establish "Sabbath" schools meeting on Sundays for poor children. By 1826, they had established several such schools in Unitarian churches and in separate chapels. On December 16, 1826, the teachers formed a group that would become the Unitarian Sunday School Society. Please read **The Sunday School: A Discourse Pronounced Before the Sunday School Society, by William Ellery Channing, (London, 1837).**

Another early effort in religious education was Judith Sargent Murray's Universalist catechism, which clearly explains Universalism in a question/answer format meant to be memorized by children. In the Universalist catechism, it is the children who ask the questions of adults. Read the first five questions and answers of **Judith Sargent Murray: Catechism**, especially the line starting with "many obvious questions..."

Another example of early religious education is in the efforts of the first Black Universalist minister, Joseph H. Jordan who founded one of the Universalist day schools in Norfolk. Please read "**Building Respect: Reverend Joseph Jordan (1842-1901)**" from **Virtue Ethics: An Ethical Development Program for High School Youth**.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Session Two: Early Unitarianism and Universalism

Use these reflection questions to guide your reading. They will provide the basis for the session discussions.

Unitarianism

- Unitarians value the human ability to do good. William Ellery Channing goes so far to write an essay called "Likeness to God." How do you view human nature, and how does that factor into your faith?
- Both William Ellery Channing and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper position Unitarian Christianity against contemporary understandings of Christianity in their own times. How would you

compare today's contemporary understanding of Unitarianism to the Unitarianism described by Channing and Harper?

Universalism

- One of the defining tenets of Universalism is its understanding of salvation. How do you understand/define salvation? Does this concept have theological resonance for you today?

Religious Instruction

- William Ellery Channing, Judith Sargent Murray and Joseph Jordan offer three distinct approaches to Religious Education. How would you describe the purpose of religious education today? Who is religious education for? What, at heart, do you think religious education should do?

Session Three: Expanding Beyond Christian Roots

Introduction to Transcendentalism

All around us lies what we neither understand nor use. Our capacities, our instincts for this our present sphere are but half developed. Let us confine ourselves to that till the lesson be learned; let us be completely natural; before we trouble ourselves with the supernatural. I never see any of these things but I long to get away and lie under a green tree and let the wind blow on me. There is marvel and charm enough in that for me. —Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), feminist, author, editor; from Summer on the Lakes



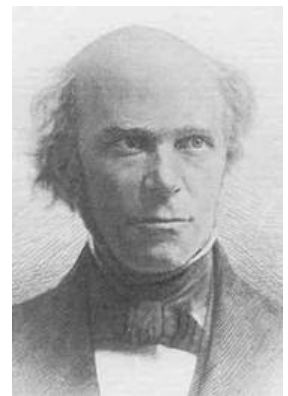
The little flower that opens in the meadows lives and dies in a season; but what agencies have concentrated themselves to produce it! So the human soul lives in the midst of heavenly help. —Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894), Unitarian Transcendentalist author, publisher, educator, and founder of the kindergarten in the U.S.

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. —Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Unitarian minister, essayist, lecturer, Transcendentalist



But there is only necessary a moment's sanity and sound senses, to teach us that there is a nature behind the ordinary, in which we have only some vague preemption right and western reserve as yet. We live on the outskirts of that region. Carved wood, and floating boughs, and sunset skies are all that we know of it. —Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Transcendentalist author, poet, philosopher

I come now to the other school. This is distinguished by its chief metaphysical doctrine, that there is in the intellect (or consciousness), something that never was in the senses, to wit, the intellect (or consciousness) itself; that man has faculties which transcend the senses; faculties which give him ideas and intuitions which transcend sensational experiences; ideas whose origin is not from sensation, nor their proof from sensation. This is the transcendental school. —Theodore Parker (1810-1860), American Transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian church.



The Transcendentalists brought shocking new theology to the Unitarians of the 19th century, beginning in the 1820s and continuing through the Civil War. They suggested that we should study “foreign” religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism for insight, that God could be found just as well in nature as in a church, and that truth dwelt as much within the human soul as in any religious text. They were individualists, iconoclasts, and the basis of what is now mainstream Unitarian Universalist theology. As the Rev. Dr. Barry Andrews writes:

Contemporary American spirituality is largely a product of Unitarianism and liberal religion. Beginning with the Transcendentalists, Unitarians offered an alternative to traditional notions of religious authority and organized religion. They gave currency to the notion of “seeker spirituality,” characterized by spiritual eclecticism, mystical yearning, religious cosmopolitanism and concern for social justice. They interpreted spirituality and mysticism in a new way, viewing religion’s locus in the experience of the individual, as well as the ability to appreciate other faith traditions as spiritual resources. Theirs is a legacy not only of historical significance, but also of contemporary relevance.

SESSION THREE READINGS

Reading 1: Margaret Fuller

“Radiant Genius and Fiery Heart: Reclaiming the legacy of Margaret Fuller, the forgotten intellectual at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement and the first American theorist of women’s equality,” by Kimberly French in *UU World* (Summer 2010).

Reading 2: Theodore Parker

“Theodore Parker, Radical Theologian” by Dean Grodzins in *UU World* (Summer 2010).

Reading 3: Theodore Parker Excerpts

“The Transient and the Permanent,” from *UU History, Faith like a River: Themes from Unitarian Universalist History*, by Alison Cornish and Jackie Clement (Workshop 4 UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2011).

Reading 4: Roots of UU Spirituality

“The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism,” by Rev. Dr. Barry Andrews.

Introduction to Humanism



Whether we grow more gross, more selfish, more grasping, more vulgar, more dishonorable, or whether we grow more delicate, more tender, more sympathetic, more aspiring, or more affectionate does not depend on whether we think the mind quantitative or qualitative. It depends on what we think of the values of those qualities. And I for one choose so-called spiritual qualities of mind and character because for me they contain the most enduring and highest joys of earth. Therefore, in this practical sense I am a firm believer in the spiritual life. And when I use the term as I frequently do, it is in this sense that I use it. —John Dietrich (1878-1957), humanist Unitarian minister, signer of the Humanist Manifesto I

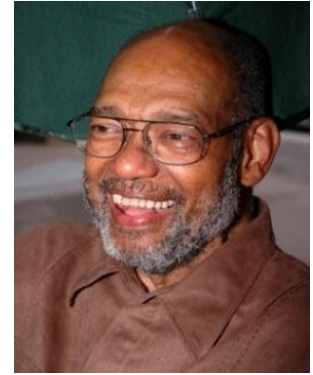
We believe in the human capacity to solve individual and social problems and to make progress. We believe in a continuing search for truth and hence that life is an adventurous quest. . . We believe in the creative imagination as a power in promoting the good life. —Rev. Lewis McGee, one of the first African Americans to be ordained a Unitarian minister and founder of the Free Religious Fellowship, an intentionally interracial Unitarian religious community on Chicago's South Side.



Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies. Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern. Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life. —Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876-1978), Unitarian religious educator and author.



“...a new model for treating black suffering must be sought. I suggest that what I term humanocentric theism and “secular” humanism are the best candidates. The essential feature of both is the advocacy of the functional ultimacy of man. Man must act as if he were the ultimate valuator or the ultimate agent in human history or both. Thus God’s responsibility for the crimes and errors of human history is reduced if not effectively eliminated.



—from Is God a White Racist? by Rev. William R. Jones, UU minister and theologian



In the end, Humanism is not a faith for the mindless or the heartless, nor for those without integrity, nor those who are merely cynical in their skepticism. It is not a featherbed for the spiritually lazy who want to believe and do as little as possible with their all-too-brief, mortal lives. Humanism calls upon those who embrace it to live as fully as we can, in all the authentic wonder and curiosity of which the human spirit is capable. It summons us to a persistent obedience to evidence and reason, to recognize in our deepest and most beautiful longings not the world that is, but the world that might be, if we, by our courage, intelligence, and dedication, will make it so. —Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, Unitarian Universalist minister.

Humanism was in many ways a natural outgrowth of the ongoing Unitarian (and to a lesser degree Universalist) desire to push at theological boundaries. If God is to be found outside the pages of the Bible, known to each person in their own way, why not consider a religion which sets aside entirely the idea of God as a supernatural entity in favor of a religion grounded in science, nature and reason? Why not a religion rooted in faith in human possibility and responsibility and a sense of wonder and reverence for the commonplace things of the real world? In 1933 a group of people led by Raymond Bragg, Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, published *A Humanist Manifesto*, which set forth the central tenets of humanism, including the assertions that “that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values” and “that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.” Both Unitarian and Universalist ministers were prominent among signatories of the document.

This session’s readings address the development and impact of humanism within 20th century Unitarian Universalism, the “revolution” in liberal religious education, and the ethics and social justice implications of contemporary humanism.

Reading 5: Essentials of Humanism

“Essentials of Humanism: What we are willing to say about the universe and our lives is based exclusively on our own shared experience and reason” by Kendyl R. Gibbons in *UU World* (Spring 2017).

Reading 6: Sources from Our Living Tradition: Humanism

“Sources from Our Living Tradition: Humanism,” by Rev. Christine Robinson in *Religious Humanism* (2006, v38).

Reading 7: Story: On Becoming Humanist

“On Becoming Humanist – A Personal Journey,” by Anthony Pinn from *What We Choose: Ethics for Unitarian Universalists*, by Amber Beland, Manish Mishra-Marzetti (Workshop 8, UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2012).

PEDAGOGY POINT

Early 20th century liberal religious educators, like Sophia Lyon Fahs and Angus H. MacLean greatly influenced our understanding of religious education, asserting that how we teach is as important, perhaps more so, than what we teach. Before Fahs and MacLean, few made connections between theology and philosophy of religious education.

Read **“It Matters What We Believe,” Chapters 1 of Sophia Fahs’ foundational work, *Today’s Children & Yesterday’s Heritage***. Sophia Lyon Fahs’ revolutionary liberal religious education philosophy and progressive theology greatly influenced 20th century liberal religion. Her legacy continues to this day.

Read **“The Method Is the Message,” Angus H MacLean’s** groundbreaking essay on religious education philosophy.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Session Three: Expanding Beyond Christian Roots

Use these reflection questions to guide your reading. They will provide the basis for the session discussions.

Transcendentalism

- Transcendentalists like Fuller, Parker, and Emerson were not in the mainstream of Unitarian Universalism during their time. How did they break from mainstream Unitarians? How might contemporary UUs respond to their theologies?
- Consider how Transcendentalists like Fuller, Parker, and Emerson balanced spiritual life and the call for ethical and moral engagement on social issues. How do you understand the relationship between your spiritual life and the call of public engagement on social issues?

Humanism

- How would you define humanism? What resonates within humanism for you? Your congregation?
- What do you think is lost or gained when God is removed from religion?
- What impels you to do good? What is the theological or philosophical grounding that pushes you to work for justice and to care for others?
- How would you describe human nature? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the ability and desire of human beings to create a better world?
- How does (can?) humanism respond to questions of evil and suffering, especially as it relates to race and racism? What does humanism offer for the possibility of liberation?

Religious Instruction

- Last week we read William Ellery Channing's work describing, "the great end of religious instruction." What do you think Sophia Lyon Fahs' "great end" or purpose is?
- For both Fahs and MacLean, how we teach religious education says a lot about what we believe. What aspects of Fahs' and MacLean's educational philosophies are still relevant today? How do these religious educational philosophies help you think about your own theology?

Session Four: 20th Century Theological Movements

Introduction



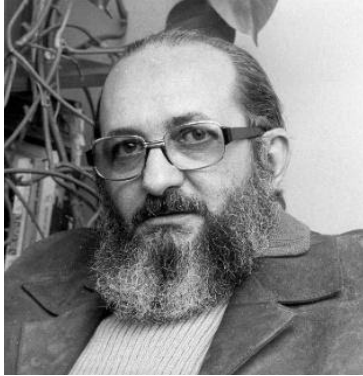
I call that church free which responds in responsibility to the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth. The tide of the Spirit finds utterance ever and again through a minority. It invites and engenders liberation from repression and exploitation, whether of nation or economic system, of race or sex or class. It bursts through rigid, cramping inheritance, giving rise to new language, to new forms of cooperation, to new and

broader fellowship. —James Luther Adams (1901-1994), Unitarian minister and theologian.

[Faith] is an expression of unconfined zeal of spirit. It is for unsundered persons. Faith tries wings, follows illusions, challenges, urges, fails, conquers. It is more than the assurance of things not seen — it is an adventure after them. Belief digs itself into the trench of creed. Faith knows no horizons, cannot live in crypts, behind padlocks. Faith is for eager and audacious persons. When belief takes the place of faith, creeds become paramount. When faith is dominant, deeds become the test.



—Clarence Skinner (1881-1949), Universalist minister, educator, writer, and social activist.



*The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. —Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.*

*In developing a method to do theology that uses religion of grassroots Latinas as its source, Mujerista Theology puts into practice a preferential option for the oppressed. It insists that liberation is not something one person can give another but that it is a process in which the oppressed are protagonists, participants in creating a reality different from the present oppressive one. —Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, in her book, *Mujerista Theology*.*



Moving into the 20th century, both Unitarian and Universalism meet up with contemporary challenges such as the Second World War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the challenge of a truly

inclusive multicultural society. They are also discovered in a contact of emerging theological movements that are led by leaders, both within and outside of Unitarian and Universalism.

SESSION FOUR READINGS

Religious Liberalism and James Luther Adams

Growing from our Unitarian roots and its focus on the use of reason, the 20th Century movement of Religious Liberalism found threads and ties to Unitarianism. Religious Liberalism (liberal as in religious liberty, not the political party) is a movement of theology which emphasizes personal and group liberty and rationality, and it is directly opposed by trends of religious fundamentalism. Some notable religious liberals are Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams.

Unitarian Universalist minister George Kimmich Beach writes in his book, *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*:

Adams holds that liberalism must no longer be confused with lax, uncritical, or mere broad-minded attitudes, least of all in an age of rising tyrannies of the Right and the Left. The aim of religious awareness, religious faith, religious community, and religious life must be radical change.

Reading 1: Five Smooth Stones

“Five Smooth Stones,” by James Luther Adams from *A Place of Wholeness: A Program for Youth Exploring Their Own Unitarian Universalist Faith Journeys*, by Beth Dana, Jesse Jaeger (Workshop 1, UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2010).

Reading 2: James Luther Adams and the Transformation of Liberalism

“James Luther Adams and the Transformation of Liberalism,” by George Kimmich Beach, General Assembly talk presented 2005, also printed in the *Journal of Liberal Religion*, Spring 2006.

Reading 3: The Five Jagged Rocks of Unitarian Universalism

“The Five Jagged Rocks of Unitarian Universalism,” By Karishma Gottfried on UUA WorshipWeb.

The Social Gospel Movement and Clarence Skinner

Universalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries referred to a belief that all souls would eventually find salvation, and none would be damned to eternal torment. In more recent years, Universalism has come to embrace broader implications of that saving message: that we must work for the salvation of all people from social sins, such as poverty, and that we must learn how to include all people within the embrace of our compassion. This Universalist theological shift paired with a larger Christian theological evolution, the Social Gospel Movement. The Social Gospel Movement was a Protestant theology that applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice. Notable theologians included Walter Rauschenbusch; Howard Thurman; and Universalist, Clarence Skinner.

Reading 4: A Religion for Greatness (excerpt)

“A Religion for Greatness” by Clarence Skinner on UUA WorshipWeb.

Reading 5: Sermon: Clarence Skinner

“Unitarian Universalist Theologians V: Clarence Skinner,” by Rev. Krista Taves, Emerson UU Chapel, February 21, 2010.

Reading 6: Social Gospel with Universalist Eyes

Debus, Kimberly. “Social Gospel with Universalist Eyes.” Web blog post. “Notes from the Far Fringe,” 2014.

Process Theology

Process theology, which developed out of the philosophy of mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, has intersected with Unitarian Universalism and influenced our ongoing theological conversation. Process theology holds that reality is unfolding in time and emphasizes ‘becoming’ over ‘being.’ It stresses relationality. Process theology heavily influenced eco-theologies, or theologies focused on the earth and our human relationship with the environment. Notable process theologians include Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and, more recently, Monica Coleman.

Reading 7: Sermon: Pancakes and Process Theology

“Pancakes and Process Theology,” by Elizabeth Stevens, *Quest for Meaning*, 2014.

Reading 8: Process and Faith

“Process and Faith,” by Monica Coleman.

Liberation Theology

Emerging during the 20th century as a response to oppression, Liberation Theology is most often associated with Latin America, but has different expressions in oppressed communities around the world, including those in the United States. Liberation theologians interpreted Christian scripture as pointing to a “preferential option for the poor,” and the call for the “Kingdom of God” as meaning a transformation of society for the liberation and humanization of all.

Liberation theology is an umbrella term for many more specific theologies: feminist, Mujerista, womanist, African American, Latin American, Asian American, LGBTQI, Native American, and more. All of these theologies are grounded in the real lived experiences of people and the real needs of communities, so these theologies are always contextual. In contrast to liberal theology, which emphasizes personal and group liberty and rationality, in liberation theologies, personal freedom is de-emphasized. Rather, the creation of communities of liberation and wholeness are emphasized. Liberation Theology is an important dialogue partner and theological strand for Unitarian Universalism.

Reading 9: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Preferential Option for The Poor

“Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Preferential Option for The Poor” by John Dear SJ in the *National Catholic Reporter* (November 2011).

Reading 10: God of the Oppressed

“Jesus is Black,” by Dr. James Cone’s in *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis Books, 1997).

Reading 11: Perspectives on Liberalism and Liberation Theology

“Perspectives on Liberalism and Liberation Theology,” from *A Place of Wholeness: A Program for Youth Exploring Their Own Unitarian Universalist Faith Journeys*, by Beth Dana, Jesse Jaeger (Workshop 8, UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2010).

PEDAGOGY POINT

“Although Freire’s watershed work in adult education is not explicitly religious, his theories have had a powerful impact on contemporary progressive and radical religious educators. Freire’s entrance with liberation pedagogy onto the American educational scene in the 1960s was well-timed. It reinforced a movement toward social justice and social reform that was rapidly developing within the mainstream culture. Liberation theology lacked a framework by which educators could translate the central theme of the transformation of society into other contexts. Freire’s method helped Christians rediscover the prophetic call to social change that not only was part of their biblical heritage but had, in fact, been an integral part of the history of adult education in the United States.” Continue reading **“Contributions to Christian Education” from Talbot School of Theology Biography of Paulo Freire,** by Roberta Clare

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Session Four: 20th Century Theological Movements

Use these reflection questions to guide your reading. They will provide the basis for the session discussions.

Religious Liberalism

- What five characteristics do you think best define religious liberalism? What differences do you see between the five smooth stones and the UUA's principles and sources?
- Are individualism and communal responsibility opposite poles? What is the proper relationship between the two?

Social Gospel Movement

- What is the Social Gospel Movement? How does Clarence Skinner bring it to Universalism?
- In what ways do you engage Unitarian Universalists in creating the "kingdom on earth?"

Process Theology

- What do you think of this conception of God? Is this understanding of God reflected in our humanist/atheist vs. theist debates?

Liberation Theology

- How can Unitarian Universalists engage authentically with Liberation Theology? Are there systemic or cultural norms within Unitarian Universalism that would have to change if we took Liberation Theology seriously?
- In "Jesus is Black," Dr. Cone addresses his white counterparts' concerns about the "universalism" of his theology. He says, "I contend that there is no universalism that is not particular." Do you agree?

Religious Instruction

- What do you think of Paolo Freire's five key principles of adult education? How useful do you think Freire's philosophy of education is in working toward empowerment and liberation?

Session Five: 21st Century UU Theology

Introduction



I am a theologian because I believe that faith matters. I believe that what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world affects how we operate within the world. I believe theology should expand our world ... I am honored to join a conversation, hewn from tough academic rock, that asserts that black women's lives can be the center of

theological activity. —Monica Coleman, in her book, Making a Way Out of No Way

We have a compelling moral purpose that can direct our lives and our energies: We are about saving the world. So what is our part? The place to begin is at home – that is, with ourselves. Notice what is life-denying and resist it. Live with the moral authority that comes from compassion and nonviolence. Form communities of people who will sustain you in living as you wish to live, whether they are study



groups or alternative living arrangements or socially responsible, sustainable businesses. Our congregations must be central gathering places for such community. —Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, in A People So Bold



A prophetic leader does not make a prophetic congregation. While all ministers and congregations would like to be seen as prophetic, truly prophetic congregations build the collective commitment necessary to power personal and social transformation. There is a large gap between intellectually understanding the need to work for justice and transformation and actively working to do so. Until we face the truth about racism and about the social construction of identity – as well as systems that support social hierarchy and inequality – we will likely produce flawed social change that only reinforces white privilege.

—Paula Cole Jones, in *A People So Bold*

Those who critique liberal religion for having an inadequate theology of sin and evil are right, if that religion cultivates among the faithful a cloistered experience of the world that closes eyes to injustice, numbs senses to its impact and horrors, and preserves innocence – as if not knowing and not seeing means one is free from responsibility.



—Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, in *A People So Bold*

Over the course of these sessions, we have looked at various strains of Unitarian and/or Universalist theology. There is considerable diversity of thought expressed from the 19th century Unitarians, Universalists, and Transcendentalists continuing through the 20th century Humanists,

and on up to 21st century Unitarian Universalists. But one thread runs through the centuries: we, and our theological ancestors, are people who believe in love. “Faith is love taking the form of aspiration,” writes Unitarian William Ellery Channing. “There is nothing in heaven above, nor in the earth beneath, that can do away with sin, but love; and we have reason to be eternally thankful that love is stronger than death,” declares Universalist Hosea Ballou. The Second Humanist Manifesto states: “we are not advocating the use of scientific intelligence independent of or in opposition to emotion, for we believe in the cultivation of feeling and love.”

However, love, for Unitarian Universalists, is not merely an emotion—it is an imperative that calls us to act. Throughout their histories, Unitarians and Universalists have embraced the idea that loving your neighbor as yourself means that we must take action on a social and political level as well as a personal one. From Judith Sargent Murray advocating for the rights of women; through Dorothea Dix campaigning for humane treatment of the mentally ill; to the many UU ministers and laypeople who have worked for the civil rights of African Americans, LGBTQI folk, immigrants and others, justice in this life, rather than salvation in the next, has been at the core of our identity. As Unitarian Universalist theology continues to evolve, the imperative to build a more just and loving community remains at the heart of who we are.

SESSION FIVE READINGS

Please look at the list below for videos to watch, which aren’t included in the reading packet for this session.

21st Century Theologies

Reading 1: Thandeka’s Theology of Personal Experience

“Thandeka’s Theology of Personal Experience,” from *What Moves Us: Unitarian Universalist Theology*, by Thandeka (Workshop 10, UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2013).

Reading 2: Sharon Welch and an Ethic of Risk

“Sharon Welch and an Ethic of Risk,” from *What We Choose: Ethics for Unitarian Universalists*, by Amber Beland, Manish Mishra-Marzetti (Workshop 9, UUA Tapestry of Faith, 2012).

Reading 3: The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology

“The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology” by Rebecca Parker from *Quest for Meaning*, 2014.

The Prophetic Church

Video 4: A Community of Communities

[“Building a Community of Communities”](#) by Paula Cole Jones, 2019 FAHS Lecture **click link for this video (not collected in the reading packet).*

Reading 5: Ethical Implications of Environmental Justice

“Ethical Implications of Environmental Justice” by Sofia Betancourt in *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment*, Manish Mishra-Marzetti and Jennifer Nordstrom, eds. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018).

Reading 6: Identity, Covenant, and Commitment

“Identity, Covenant, and Commitment” by Paul Razor in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, John Gibb Millspaugh, ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009).

Video 7: Proclaiming A Black UU Theology

[BLUU Harper Jordan Memorial Symposium](#), final plenary session recapping experiences and theologies discussed. Video on Facebook, start at 8:14. **click link for this video (not collected in the reading packet).*

PEDAGOGY POINT

Mark A. Hicks, Ed.D, professor of religious education and formerly professor of educational transformation, describes what it takes to create transformative faith formation experiences that engage the intersection of hope and action. Read Hick’s article: **“Educating for Social Change,”** to learn more.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Session Five: 21st Century UU Theology

Use these reflection questions to guide your reading. They will provide the basis for the session discussions.

- Authors Thandeka, Rebecca Parker, Paula Cole Jones, and Paul Razor, each in different ways, describe the challenges in identifying a common Unitarian Universalist theology or

experience. Is such a common theology possible or even desirable? How would you begin to articulate a common Unitarian Universalist theology? What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?

- Both Sofia Betancourt and Sharon Welch describe ethics—Betancourt, an ethic of land and Welch, an ethic of risk. What role do ethics play in your understanding of faith? What do you think of Welch’s ethic of risk? What do you think of Betancourt’s ethic of land? How might an ethic of risk or an ethic of land, as described, create opportunities for future justice work?
- The BLUU Organizing Collective Board talks about what it means to center Blackness in Unitarian Universalism. How might Unitarian Universalism be strengthened by centering many particular identities?
- Paul Rasor begins his essay with, “We cannot create a prophetic church unless we know who we are.” What does it mean to be a prophetic church? How does your understanding of our UU identity and our UU theology serve as a grounding for a prophetic UU church?

Religious Instruction

- Mark Hicks describes the need to learn, unlearn, and relearn in order to create transformative educational experiences. How can you, in your work, create such transformative learning experiences?

Session Six: Closing Session

Next Steps

You are strongly encouraged to continue your exploration through continued reading and discussion, either as a group or individually. Begin with the video recordings of the 2017 Minns Lectures, [Historical and Future Trajectories of Black Lives Matter and Unitarian Universalism](#) by Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed and Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt. The lectures were given shortly after the former UUA President, Peter Morales, announced his resignation.

[Lecture 1, Mark Morrison-Reed](#) (1:47:40)

[Lecture 2, Rosemary Bray McNatt](#) (2:16:49)

Morrison-Reed's UU World magazine article, "[The Black Hole in the White UU Psyche](#)," is adapted from his Minns lecture.

The UUA's 2020 Commission on Institutional Change Report: [Widening the Circle of Concern](#) will set the scene for the next decade.

Closing Reading

To close the session and module, all participants who wish to participate are invited to take turns reading a line from "Benediction" by Louise Green from *A People So Bold*:

Benediction

Who is the prophet in these urgent times?

You are the prophet, for there may be no other who will speak and act now.

The prophet hears and responds to an insistent and urgent inner voice.

The prophet speaks from an internal fountain, giving voice to another's silence.

The prophet sees and expresses in uncommon ways, upsetting the status quo.

The prophet sends the wake-up call in the present, to shape the future.

How do I develop a prophetic voice in these challenging times?

Observe nature and grow all parts of the tree: branches, trunk, and roots.

Branches are the many outspreading ways of acting on inner call.

Stay connected to the trunk, for fallen limbs are swept away by water or fire.

Be willing to pare away when too many branches grow.

Let leaves drop in their time, for the cycle will turn round.

Grow and let go to flourish, trusting other seasons will come.

The trunk is steady with circles of community, rings of support widening with age.

Witness strong branches supported by many layers.

Observe that when limbs are damaged, the trunk perseveres.

See small trunks grow light shoots, wisely testing support.

Believe that a trunk will mature over time, sending nourishment upward.

Roots are the grounding of the whole tree, the foundation for transformation.

Plant wisely in rich earth for substance.

Gather nutrients from a distance in unseen waters.

Sustain the roots through underground connections and keep the trunk standing.

Weather many seasons, drawing on multiple sources for food.

How will we hear the prophets in our complex era?

Follow the still, small voice, even when unpopular.

Offer inner knowing to the outer landscape.

Bear clear witness to the claims of many sacred traditions.

Cultivate strength and compassion.

Develop wisdom that is tenacious, and flexible when needed.

Watch, wait, and choose the strategic moment.

Disrupt or challenge when there is clarity of vision.

Send a startling message through crafted purpose.

Say what is not welcome, at the right time.

Speak boldly about what the majority wants to ignore.

Practice faithfulness, foresee consequences, make history.

Offer gratitude, for in oneness with other trees, a forest grows.