

# 2000 Years of UU History: A Whirlwind Tour

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Chalice lighting: SLT #657 It Matters What We Believe

## Earliest origins

1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE  
Early Christianity—lots of beliefs about Jesus.

325 CE Roman Empire  
Council of Nicea affirms Trinity & denounces those who believe differently (Arians) as heretics

**Why?** 312 CE Constantine converts to Christianity. What has been a persecuted minority religion is now the state religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine wants church to be unified in beliefs so that it can help unify the culturally diverse empire.

(Skipping over the **Middle Ages** for now!)

1517 Europe  
Martin Luther publishes 95 Theses: Protestant Reformation begins.

A key principle of the Reformation:  
**Back to Scripture!** (Interpreting the Bible for yourself, not relying on a priest to do it for you.) 1450: *printing press invented.*

**Unitarians and Universalists** trace their roots back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. They were two separate religious groups for hundreds of years.

## Unitarians

Early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe  
Christian humanists in Poland and Transylvania studied the Bible and couldn't find any mention of the Trinity. They affirmed the unity of God and became known as **Unitarian** Christians. They were heavily persecuted, especially in Poland.  
But...

**A famous Unitarian:**  
**Michael Servetus**, burned at the stake on the orders of John Calvin (1553).

1568 Transylvania  
Inspired by the example of his Muslim (Ottoman Empire) overlords and neighbors, King John Sigismund of Transylvania signs the **Edict of Toleration**: people are free to practice the faith of their choice. (Most governments at this time required people to belong to the state church!)

## Universalists

16<sup>th</sup> century  
Universalism doesn't exist yet as a movement. Wait 150 years or so!

present-day Romania  
Unitarian Christians are still alive and well in Transylvania, now part of Romania. Many UU congregations in the U.S. have partner churches in Transylvania. Rev. Kevin Mann recently preached at UUFSCC about this history.

## Unitarians

### 17<sup>th</sup>-century America

Puritans from England arrive as colonizers in North America. They had read about early Christian communities in the Bible and wanted to reform the Church of England in their image—less powerful bishops, more congregational autonomy. When the Church wouldn't change, they fled to America and set up their own self-governing churches. There were no creeds; members signed a **covenant** promising to “walk together” with each other. The churches collaborated but made their own decisions. This is how we still govern ourselves today: **congregational polity**.

But note: these folks are not Unitarian. They believe in the Trinity and accept the **Calvinist** doctrines that humans were incurably corrupt (**original sin**) and that God had already decided whom to save and whom to damn forever (**predestination**).

### 18<sup>th</sup>-century America

Gradually the Calvinist doctrines of **original sin** and **predestination** begin to seem less appealing. With the Enlightenment, Liberals appear in the New England congregations, arguing that humanity is basically good and we have the power to improve ourselves, working with God for our salvation.

Meanwhile, Biblical scholars in Europe were discovering that the question “Who wrote the Bible?” was a lot more complicated than earlier generations had understood. For example, the first books of the Hebrew Bible had long been attributed to Moses. Now, scholars discovered they were the work of editors who combined at least two ancient sources that often disagreed with each other. The new “**historical criticism**” led some people to wonder if they could really believe in the miracles they read about in the Bible.

### 1819

After years of growing tension between conservative and liberal Congregationalists, a fight breaks out in 1805 over control of Harvard Divinity School. Tensions continue.

In the thick of it, William Ellery Channing preaches a sermon in Baltimore called “Unitarian Christianity,” spelling out the core of the liberals' faith: rational interpretation of the Bible; the unity and goodness of God; and Jesus as a great human being. These principles were the foundation of the new denomination: **Unitarianism**.

## Universalists

### 18<sup>th</sup>-century America

Different groups of Christians around Philadelphia and rural New England start asking, how could God be so cruel as to condemn anyone to Hell? They re-read the Bible and find no mention of eternal damnation. They become **Universalists**, who believe the essence of God is love, and all humanity will be saved.

### Famous Universalists:

**John Murray**, a British Universalist (they were in England too) who came to America in 1770. The story of Murray and Potter's chapel is a great Universalist myth that happens to be true!  
**Judith Sargent Murray**, who married John Murray, was an important feminist writer.

### A famous Universalist:

**Hosea Ballou**, whose *Treatise on the Atonement* (1805) is still the most important work of Universalist theology ever written. Wonderful stories about the infinite love of God!

### Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century America

Universalism is growing, especially in rural communities. Later it becomes one of the most popular denominations in the country.

Like Unitarians, Universalists have always believed in freedom of conscience. They write statements of common faith—like the Principles and the new Values statement—but never use them as a creed or a test for membership.

## Unitarians

## Universalists

19<sup>th</sup>-century America

**Reform!** Both denominations are caught up in reform movements, including...

### Abolitionism

Some Unitarians and Universalists become fearless anti-slavery activists.

But many other Unitarians profit from slavery and do nothing to oppose it.

### Health Care

1881 Having nursed soldiers in the American Civil War, Universalist **Clara Barton** founds the American Red Cross.

### Women's Equality

1863 **Olympia Brown**, a Universalist, was the first woman to be ordained by a denomination as a minister in the United States.

1880s–1920s Unitarian women clergy serve congregations across the Midwest, including **Rev. Marion Murdock**, who served the Unitarian church in Santa Cruz as acting minister, 1910-1911.

19<sup>th</sup>- & 20<sup>th</sup>-century America

**Big changes in theology.** Some Unitarians and Universalists remain Christians. Others move toward...

### Transcendentalism

1840s **Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller**, et al. say the ultimate source of religious authority is the individual conscience and intuition (the divine within us), not the Bible. Our contemporary interest in world religions and nature spirituality get their start here too.

### Humanism

1920s Some Unitarians go further: if conscience is the best authority, why do you need God at all? Especially if you have no felt experience of God? Humanists break with Christian theology and focus on human efforts in the here and now.

But the optimism of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century humanism is deeply challenged by World War II. How can we explain the Holocaust?

### “Universal Religion”

1940s Some Universalists want their religion to become much broader—a universal synthesis of all world religions.

But gradually we learned that not all world religions want to be assimilated!

1940s

### The Fellowship Movement

A new approach to church-building: the American Unitarian Association encourages small groups of laypeople to form lay-led congregations known as “fellowships.”

(Sound familiar? UUFSCC was founded in 1957 as part of this movement.)

Many fellowships are still in existence today; some are still lay-led.

By the 1950s, Unitarians and Universalists know they have a lot in common: respect for freedom of conscience, a commitment to social justice, a liberal understanding of human nature. They also have a common problem: declining numbers. They decide to pool their strengths. Our youth lead the way as our Unitarian and Universalist youth organizations merge in 1953.

1961

### Consolidation

The Unitarians and Universalists merge to become... **Unitarian Universalists!**

1967–1977

### The Empowerment Controversy

A hard chapter in our history: after pledging money to be used and controlled by groups of Black UUs, the UUA pleads a budget crunch and refuses to pay out the money. Many Black UUs leave our congregations—including our UUA past president, Bill Sinkford.

2018's UUA-wide fundraising campaign for Black Lives of UU was an important step in reconciliation.

### Unitarian Universalism in Santa Cruz

- 1866: Unitarian church founded (2<sup>nd</sup> in all of California; lasted until 1879)
- 1902: All Souls Unitarian Church founded
- 1957: UUFSCC founded
- 1966: Fellowship building opened
- 1971: All Souls Unitarian disbanded
- 1985: UUFSCC calls its first minister

What questions do you have about our congregation's history?

### Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century

- In the 1970s, women enter professional ministry in large numbers. Since the 1990s, women have made up more than 50% of UU clergy.
- Movements led by LGBTQ+ people transform attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender.
- Environmental activism.
- Renewed interest in “spirituality” in our congregations.
- Working to dismantle white supremacy and develop multicultural competencies in our congregations.
- UUA creates new [shared values statement](#) as part of bylaw revisions

So where are we today? What trends do you see in our present-day history? What else in our history do *you* want to understand?

### For further reading:

- History of Unitarian Universalism resource page at <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/history>
- Wanda Misbach Edgerton, *From These Beginnings: The First 120 Years for Santa Cruz Unitarian Universalists* (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TdIzQG5eLFxNiYL4xG627HaqT4mi5PoA/view?usp=sharing>)
- John Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (published in 1989, but still lots of good stuff about UU history)
- And many more detailed books and articles—just ask me!