



## **A Short History of Unitarian Universalism**

Unitarian Universalism is a religious movement composed of two heresies. The 1961 merger of Unitarian and Universalist denominations affirmed almost fifteen hundred years of parallel history. Both had been declared heretical (the word originally meant "to choose") in the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era (specifically in 325 and 381 at the Councils of Nicea and of Constantinople). Both persevered, embodying liberal theologies despite persecution. Both struggled for tolerance and justice.

Historically, Unitarianism described a belief in the unity or oneness of God; Universalism was the belief in universal salvation -- the infinitely loving nature of ultimate reality, and the absence of eternal damnation. These concepts flourished in ancient philosophies, in early Christian thought, in Judaism and Islam, and in earth-based spiritualities throughout time. Cherished by cultures and individuals -- at times through great hardship -- visions of unity and universal love are foundational to Unitarian Universalism.

Prefigured by the earliest colonists, liberal religious thought and polity has deep roots in America. Universalism formally established itself in 1796; Unitarianism founded its Association in 1825. Influential in the founding of the United States were Abigail and John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Paul Revere and Thomas Jefferson. The development of a particularly American cultural voice was assisted (some say created) by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott and Margaret Fuller.

Having known oppression first hand, these two religious movements have a tradition of social justice activism. Unitarians and Universalists have been instrumental advocates of women's right to vote; the abolition of slavery; pacifism; temperance; feminism; ethical relations with those with mental illness, children and people in poverty; and civil rights. Justice work continues in a wide range of issues, including human rights and multiculturalism,

environmental protection, sustainable business and ethical governance.

One example is the work for civil rights. The Rev. Dr. John Haynes Holmes worked with others to found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Planned Parenthood, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In 1965, approximately 20% of UU ministers marched with Martin Luther King in the three marches from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery. James Reeb, a minister at All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, D.C. and a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was clubbed in Selma and two days later died from massive head trauma. Two weeks after his death, Viola Liuzzo, a Unitarian Universalist civil rights activist, was murdered after her participation in the protest march from Selma to Montgomery.

The principle of the worth and dignity of every individual has led UUs to continue to work for civil rights. Having voted approval in 1984, UU congregations have taken leadership for the recognition of same-sex marriage In May 2004; the first state-sanctioned same-sex marriage in the United States was performed at the UU Arlington Street Church in Boston. GLBTQ people are ordained as ministers. Many a congregation, including the Keweenaw UU Fellowship, has undertaken the study and commitment necessary to become a designated Welcoming Congregation.

A non-creedal religious movement, Unitarian Universalism embodies its way of life through democratic practices of its principles and sources of inspiration. Each UU congregation is its own seat of governmental power; congregations voluntarily associate to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in order to share educational, social justice and credentialing tasks.

Affirming ancient and universal truths throughout history has led Unitarian Universalism to value the magnificent religious diversity of humankind. All spiritual, religious and ethical paths of life are welcome. Naturalist, Atheist, Agnostic, Humanist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Pagan, Buddhist, Wiccan and innumerable other nuanced perspectives come together in Unitarian Universalism to affirm our essential unity in and with a universe of mystery and wonder.

For further information on Unitarian Universalist history, we recommend:

[famousuus.com](http://famousuus.com)

and

<http://archive.uua.org/info/origins.html>

and

<http://www.uua.org/visitors/ourhistory/6186.shtml>

and

<http://www.geo.sunysb.edu/UU-history/links.htm>

and

[http://www.uuabookstore.org/client/client\\_pages/Unitarian%20Universalist%20History.pdf](http://www.uuabookstore.org/client/client_pages/Unitarian%20Universalist%20History.pdf)

and

<http://www.cucw.org/pdfs/UU%20History.pdf>

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