

UU History & Identity

Lesson 2: What is Unitarian? (part 1)

1.29.2017

Objectives: Exploring early Unitarian theology and history through the 16th Century.

Materials: flipchart, lesson attachment, camera, box of props for Early Christianity.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ List as many words you can think of that begin with the prefix “uni-”
 - ▶ List as many words you can think of that begin with the prefix “tri-”
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: “One Minute, Please!” (5 minutes max)

Pair youth up randomly. Each taking turns, the aim of the game is to talk for one minute on a given subject. Teacher announces the topic and one person in the pair has to speak for one minute on that topic. Then switch. Choose subjects to stimulate the imagination and which may be amusing. Put a stopwatch on each turn to see how long they last before drying up! Subjects might include: my 3 favorite places in the world, why short/long haircuts are good for you, 10 things you can do with duct tape, recipes that should include Nutella, famous people’s lives I’d try out.

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (from UU minister, Forrest Church)

“Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.”

4. Joys and Sorrows (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of meeting one

another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **What is a Unitarian? Filming our response** (20 minutes)

Filming: With teacher using camera, film each youth simply asking the question "What is a Unitarian?" Encourage youth to use funny voices and expressions as well as serious, newscaster-style tone, or even in a different language. They can put emphasis on different words, like "What IS a Unitarian" or "WHAT is a Unitarian?"

Teacher talk: To answer this question, we have to dig up our roots in Christianity where we see Unitarians as people who had to decide what to believe at several crucial moments in Western religious history.

[Handout the attachment Our Religious Family Tree: a tree that depicts the three Abrahamic faiths and the UU branch.]

We are actually related to Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Muslims, and more. Our family tree is called the Abrahamic family tree, a group of historically monotheistic faiths that trace their history back to one historic figure, Abraham, and his relationship with God.

- Ask the class what the word monotheistic might mean? (MONO means one and THEISTIC means God. The God that Jews and Christians call Yahweh and Muslims call Allah refers to one God they worshipped.)
- Go around asking each student to share one thing that they know about Christian beliefs/history. Record their ideas on the flip chart.
- Ask how many youths have friends who attend a Christian church? Unless those churches are in Transylvania, their friends very likely attend a *trinitarian* Christian church. Trinitarians and Unitarians had a big argument about Jesus in the fourth century. Unitarians lost that argument but their belief did not go away.

6. **Setting the Stage:** (30 minutes)

- Spread out the props in a pile on a tablecloth/piece of felt in the center of the group (You may want to do this on the floor).
- Invite youth to select one prop from the pile. (Youth can pair up if needed.) Ask that they treat these materials gently, as they will be reused for future classes. Have each youth quickly identify their prop ("I've got a hammer" or "I think this is a whip and a chain. Freaky.")
- Straighten out the cloth, asking them to imagine it as a "stage" for their props.

- Introduce the activity, stating that UU faith finds its roots in Christianity. In order to witness history playing out through the centuries, we have to set the stage. We will briefly review early Church history—the first sixteen centuries as the first part of our review—so that our Unitarian and Universalist heritages have some historical context.
- As teacher reads aloud each historical event, youth determine at what point their selected prop matches the scene. Whenever they think it is the right moment, they identify themselves and their prop and place it out on the stage. Give them a “ding ding” if correct or a “bzzzt” if incorrect, asking someone else to try until the correct prop is offered. After the correct prop is placed, continue to the next historical event.

(See attached timeline of events.)

7. **Filming:** (10 minutes) **Teacher will film.** After completing the timeline of events, ask each youth to hold up their prop for the camera and summarize, in their own words, the religious event connected to their prop.
8. **Family Religious Tree:** Hand out attached copies of “My Family’s Religious Tree.” Encourage youth to discuss with parents and learn about their own family’s religious ancestry and how they got to be who they are today.
9. **Say goodbye until next time:** Extinguish the chalice, saying:
“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”
10. **Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.
 - leave lesson plan and all materials organized
 - return blue/yellow stones to containers
 - wipe the whiteboard clean
 - tables and chairs neatly returned
 - nametags collected in Ziploc bag
 - leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

Timeline of Events

BCE through First century

1. The Jews are a monotheistic people, meaning they believe in one God. However, the Jews are nearly always oppressed by powerful empires, be it Egypt or Rome. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah foretells that a Messiah, a savior who will deliver the nation of Israel out of oppression, will come out of the region of Judea. **(Prop: Torah-style Scroll of Isaiah)**
2. Two thousand years ago, a baby is born in a stable. He grows to be a rabbi, a Jewish teacher, who preaches a radical message of love, justice, and forgiveness. At the age of 33, he is crucified by the lower Roman courts. According to Christian scripture, this teacher rises from the dead three days after his death. **(Prop: Nativity set)**
3. Forty years after Jesus' death, Paul is the first prominent Christian missionary and travels the eastern Mediterranean Sea spreading the gospel message that Jesus was the Messiah and that his teachings are the way to salvation. **(Prop: Boat)**
4. In the first two centuries following Jesus' teaching ministry and death, his message and the teachings of early Christian theologians travel mostly through letters to small religious communities scattered around the Mediterranean. The four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are written down for the first time. **(Prop: Pen and paper)**
5. Early Christians are perceived as a religious cult. Believers are hunted and persecuted, often stoned to death in both public and secret executions. **(Prop: Stones)**

Second & Third Centuries

6. The Roman Empire reaches its greatest expanse. Roman rule influences religious practice throughout Europe and the Near East. Romans worship many gods, while Jews and Christians worship one God. **(Prop: Roman helmet)**
7. Early Christians met and lived in hiding, often in catacombs (underground tombs) throughout the Roman empire. **(Prop: Skeleton).**

Fourth Century

8. Constantine the Great legalizes Christianity in 313, making it easier to talk about Christianity in public and scholarly settings. Different ideas emerge about Jesus. **(Prop: Crown)**
9. Baptism—immersion in water representing a cleansing and rebirth—becomes the predominant ritual of conversion into Christianity. **(Prop: Water)**

10. The first in a long line of elected Popes is put in charge of the political and theological growth of Christianity. The word “Catholic” (meaning universal) comes into common use to describe the organized Christian church. **(Prop: Papal miter)**
11. **IMPORTANT TURNING POINT IN OUR STORY:** The First Council of Nicaea is held in 325 C.E. The meeting set out to discuss two dominant threads in Christianity: one that worships Jesus as God and another that follows Jesus as a savior sent by God. This critical theological difference becomes the fork in the road where our Unitarian ancestors depart from the doctrines of the church. **(Prop: Fork taped to road)**
12. The Christian philosopher Arius argues that the Trinity is impossible, as God had to create Jesus if Jesus was his Son. Plus, there’s nothing about a Trinity anywhere in the Bible, says Arius. Early Unitarians are known as Arians. **(Prop: Anti-Trinitarian symbols—no triangles, no #3)**
13. Arius loses the argument. Twenty-two bishops vote that Jesus is God. The **Doctrine of the Trinity** (that God is three in one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and **Nicene Creed** (statement of belief in these doctrines) are established. The Doctrine of the Trinity spreads far and wide, and Arians are forced into hiding as the Trinitarian Catholic church rises in power. Denying the divinity of Jesus can lead to torture and death. Christians now worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Saint Patrick uses the shamrock with its compound leaf to explain the three-in-one trinity. Others use water—which comes in the form of ice, liquid, and vapor—to explain the doctrine. **(Prop: Shamrock/ice cube)**

Sixth Century

14. The symbol of Jesus hanging on the cross first comes into common religious use. **(Prop: Crucifix)**

Seventh Century

15. The first Old English translations of the Christian scripture are written. **(Prop: Bible)**

Twelfth & Thirteenth Centuries

16. The Crusades are fought. European invasion forces seek to take back the Holy Land from Muslim nations. **(Prop: Crusader pennant)**
17. During the Medieval Inquisition, heretics (including Christians who deny the Trinity) are tried and tortured by the Church’s courts. **(Prop: Whip and stocks)**

Fifteenth Century

18. The invention of a moveable type, the Gutenberg press, in the fifteenth century allows for the first mass printing of Christian scripture. More people have access to scriptures than ever before, making for more religious argument and dissent. Our Unitarian ancestors, reading scripture for themselves, find that the doctrines of the church are not consistent with the Bible's teachings. (**Prop: Stack of Bibles**).

Sixteenth Century

19. According to religious legend, monk-priest-theologian Martin Luther nails 95 theses about the failings and errors of Catholic Christian doctrine to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. The Protestant Reformation begins, protesting against Catholic doctrine and practice, and calling for the reformation of the Church. (**Prop: Hammer and nails**)
20. Protestants, including Christians who don't believe in the Trinity, are imprisoned and burned at the stake by the Inquisition, an effort of the Catholic church to root out heretics. The Unitarian church as we know it emerges as part of this Protestant movement. (**Prop: Kindling and matches**)

Our Religious Family Tree:

