UU Identity & History

Lesson 3: Unitarianism Comes to America

10.4.2026

Objectives: Focus on Unitarianism in America.

Materials: Flipchart, blindfold, copies of news script, religious props.

Time allotment: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service (end class 9:50/11:50 to begin chapel 9:55/11:55).

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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:
     - Who do you think Jesus was? Put your name under the category of choice:

       Fully human----------Fully God----------Both human and God
     - What's one question you've always had about Christianity?
   - Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. **Silly Fun: "Guess Who's a Unitarian"** (5 minutes max)

   Put a chair in the middle of the room. Have everyone stand in a circle around the chair. Get a volunteer to be "IT," who sits in the chair with blindfold over eyes. Shuffle the circle around. Teacher points silently to one of the youth, who then DISGUISES voice and says "I'm a Unitarian" and "IT" tries to guess the correct identity. Give anywhere between one and three guesses, depending on the size of the class. If "IT" guesses incorrectly, "IT" has to take one more turn.

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, Doug Kraft)

   "Unitarian Universalism is not a rock to hold onto. It is a river to swim in. If you want a set of beliefs to hold onto, if you want rules to guide your life in all situations, if you want a foundation for a spiritual fortress, you will probably be disappointed with us. However, if you want to dive into the river and explore, if you think that what you experience and what you do is more important than what you believe, we may have something to offer. Life itself

is more like a river than a rock… Unitarian Universalism is about learning to swim in the river rather than climbing out of it onto a rock."

4. **Group Discussion** (5 minutes)

   Teacher talks: These words were written by Thomas Jefferson, a white founding father of the United States, to explain why the colonies needed to free themselves from England. Note: he was likely using "man" as short for "human," but who he understood to be included in the category is a lively debate.

   "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

   Questions for discussion:

   - What does he mean by truth?
   - Are these truths similar to principles, like the UU principles we have explored?
   - Jefferson says that a king or government doesn't have power over citizens, but is *given* power by the citizens. How might this idea translate when thinking about God as having power over people?

5. **What is a Unitarian? Part 2** (25 minutes)

   Teacher summarizes: Last week, we talked about the first millennium or so of Christianity and mostly about Europe and the Near East. The United States was not in existence for most of that history, and the First Nations people living in North America certainly were not affected by the argument over the Trinity. *So how did Unitarianism show up in America where it took hold and flourished?*

   Today, we are talking about America and ideas/philosophies from the early to mid-1800s, before the American Civil War.

   - As we learned from Thomas Jefferson's quote, many white Americans were questioning long-held beliefs about power and societal structures.
   - Up to this point, Unitarians still thought of themselves as Christians. Today's focus will be on religious ideas of the earliest "breakaway" preachers, like William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou (a Universalist who influenced Unitarians).
   - **William Ellery Channing** preached a famous sermon in Baltimore in which he put forth **(1)** the claim that Jesus might solely be human, not God; **(2)** the Bible might not be the inerrant (mistake-free) word of God; **(3)** the Trinity is NOT biblical as there is no mention of the "trinity" anywhere in the Bible.

- **Hosea Ballou** came along and said, "That's right, there is no Trinity. Oh, and maybe there is no hell, either." This was MAJOR news and the first time that Unitarians in America really declared their "party line" on the Christian faith. We are going to make a broadcast of that major news.

For the skit (about 20 minutes)**:** We need a director, news anchor, field reporters, Channing, Ballou, Emerson, a modern Christian, and Jesus. Each youth gets a prop according to the script. Hand the "Channel 1 News" character notes (attachment) over to the youth and let them run with it. Youth not playing a role can be audience.

***** *If group dynamics challenge youth in creating their own skit, use the example script provided.*

Teachers may choose to take a few pictures using their phone camera. If so, please forward photos onto RE staff, to be printed and hung on classroom wall.

6. **Post-Skit Discussion: What "Unitarian" Means to Us Today** (10 minutes)

- We are NOT a Christian denomination anymore (we will learn about how that happens in future lessons).
- What legacy of our Unitarian ancestors is left to us? What lessons can we learn from the faith they lived?
- How do you think most UUs today relate to the life story and teachings of Jesus?
- How do you think most UUs today relate to the idea of God? How might modern ideas be similar to/ different from earlier ideas?
- What might the word Unitarian mean to an atheist UU?
- Have you been a part of Unity's Christmas pageant? Many UU churches don't celebrate Christmas like we do. Why do you think we celebrate Jesus' birth here at Unity?

7. **UU Timeline** (5 minutes)

- On the wall, there will be a long, blank, laminated timeline tickmarked with centuries. There will also be small laminated circles listing events in our history, plus some sticky-tack/clips for attaching those on the timeline.
- From week to week, based on the events covered by the lesson, invite the class as a whole to place historical events on the timeline as best as they know. (Remember to select only those events covered so far in the course.)
- We will keep adding to the timeline, week after week, as we cover more UU history.
- Teachers can help by referencing the actual UU timeline (last page of lesson plan).

8. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."*

9. **Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.
    - leave lesson plan and all materials organized
    - wipe the whiteboard clean
    - tables and chairs neatly returned
    - nametags collected in Ziploc bag
    - leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

UU Timeline

- Earliest written evidence of Judaism, the first major religion with only one God (1000 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth born (around 4 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth executed (33 CE)
- Christian church votes to decide if Jesus is the same as God (325 CE)
- Martin Luther starts the Reformation, when Protestant churches started splitting off from the Catholic Church (1517)
- Unitarian Michael Servetus burnt at the stake for writing books that reject the idea of God as a Trinity (three persons in one) (1553)
- First official declaration of national religious tolerance (in Transylvania) (1568 CE)
- First Unitarian church built in North America (1686 CE)
- First Universalist sermon preached in North America (1770 CE)
- American Revolutionary War (1775–1783)
- First time a Unitarian minister publicly preaches that the Bible might not actually be written by God but by humans (1819 CE)
- Unitarians and Universalists work to abolish slavery (1830s)
- American Transcendentalism (about 1836-1860)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson preaches a graduation speech at Harvard in which he questions whether Jesus was any more divine than any other person (1838)

- Humanism and atheism emerge in our faith (1860s post-civil war and/or 1918+ post WWI)
- Unity Church – Unitarian built at Holly and Grotto (1905)
- Unitarian Service Committee formed to save Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution (1940)
- The Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church merge together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (1961)
- The Seven Principles are adopted as a statement of our faiths' common values and ideals (1961, 1984)
- General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association held in Minneapolis, MN (2010)
- Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) is formed in the wake of conversations among Black UUs at the Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland, OH (July 2015)