UU Identity & History

Lesson 5: What is Universalist? (part 2)

11.1.2026

Objectives: Explore Universalist thought as it comes to America.

Materials: Would-you-rather cards, John Murray lesson box and story scripts.

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).

---

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:
     - Initial below if you have ever crossed over the Atlantic Ocean.
     - Write the title of a book you're reading, for school or for fun.
   - Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. **Silly Fun: Would You Rather…?** (5 minutes max)

   In the classroom, there will be a selection of cards with questions "Would You Rather…?" Read a few questions aloud and ask the youth to physically move themselves to designated places in the room based on their answers (so standing vote). Give each cluster a few minutes to chatter about their reasons.

   Example: "*Would you rather be confined to your room for one year OR go wherever you want but always have to wear a giraffe costume?*"

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 social reformer and UU, Susan B. Anthony)

   "*Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.*"

4. **Review and Discussion** (10 minutes)

Teacher talks: Last week we talked about Universalism, a Christian movement that believed God loved everyone, and that salvation was universal (everyone would go to heaven). At the end of class, we noted that the message of Universalism didn't go over very well in Europe. This was at a time when Europe was ruled by hereditary monarchy, or royalty that was passed down through select families (or overthrown through wars). It was always the few who were the Elect/divinely chosen by God.

Questions for Discussion:

- Who can remind us what Calvinists believe?

  (Hint: predestination, the Elect, hell for everyone but a chosen few, decided from birth, nothing you can do to change it, being good doesn't matter, God picks people to save, God is all-knowing.)

- Why was the message of universal love so unpopular in Calvinist England? What did the Calvinists have to lose? What do people get out of believing that God only loves them and not those "others"?
- In contrast, what do people get out of believing that God loves all human beings, without exception?
- Do you think that some people don't deserve God's love—Adolf Hitler, Muammar Qaddafi, Mohammed Atta (one leader of 9/11 terrorist attack)?
- Does being Universalist mean we should let people with ideas like Hitler or Qaddafi join our church?

5. **What is a Universalist? Part 2** (30 minutes)

Invite youth to tell the story "Universalism Comes to America." This story will be told with the help of visual props. Give each youth a copy of attached script to follow. Each text box is part of the storytelling. **Take turns going round the room, with youth speaking the storyline and others helping move the appropriate props.**

Questions for discussion:

- Why do you think John Murray's message of *salvation for everyone* resonated with white people in America? What else was happening in America in 1770 that set the historical context for a more inclusive, universal regard for human beings?

  (*Hint: The Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. British troops fired into a Boston mob, who were demonstrating against British troops at the customs commission. This event was later credited as the first battle in the American Revolution that began five years later, and was used as an incident to further the colonists' cause of rebellion against the monarchy—who were considered the Elect.*)

- Do you think everyone in America appreciated John Murray's message?

  (*Historical anecdote: General George Washington appointed Murray as the chaplain of the Rhode Island Brigade, but many other preachers complained because of his lack of belief in hell.*)

- How do you think Black Americans in the 1700s would react to the idea that God loved everyone? What about Native Americans?

- When we say "everyone has inherent worth and dignity" or "everyone has the right to search for truth and meaning," how do we know we are really including *everyone*? How are these principles different from saying "all lives matter" today?

  (Hint: UU principles are aspirational. UUs are asked to recognize material inequality and inequity in the world and work to build a more just and loving world. Recognizing both aspiration and reality can be tricky! But also, prophetic.)

- Not all Unitarian Universalists today frame their religious beliefs around the idea of "God." How might humanist Universalists express their belief in Universalism?

  (Consider: Universal healthcare/education/human rights)

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

   - On the wall, there will be a long, blank, laminated timeline tick marked with centuries. There will also be small laminated circles listing events in our history, plus tape 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).

7. **Announcement:**

   No RE next Sunday--happy MEA weekend. The following Sunday, Oct. 30, we will have our first Story Sunday of the year. As per our class agreements, please go to the worship service with family and/or friends.

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)