UU Identity & History

Lesson 7: Religious Humanism

11.15.2026

Objectives: Explore religious humanism and its contribution to UU theology.

Materials: Flipchart paper labeled "Beliefs Abound," cardstock ideas about god/humanism, hymnals, lesson attachment.

Time allotment: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 20 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:
     - If you had to choose, what ONE THING makes something "human"?
     - Among three fundamental dimensions of Reality, what feels most important for you: The Divine, Human, or Nature/Earth? All of the above? None of the above?
   - Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. **Opening Activity: Beliefs Abound** (5 minutes)

   Invite youth to look through the collection of printed cardstock and choose ONE that summarizes their relationship to the idea of god. Blank cardstock and markers are provided so youth can opt to use other words or draw a picture to express their ideas and beliefs more fully. Have them tape the ONE statement or drawing to the flipchart paper labeled "Beliefs Abound."

   Some ideas printed out include:

   - I believe in something greater than us, but I don't call it "God."
   - I believe in a god that designed the universe but doesn't interfere with it every day.
   - I can't believe in a god given all the evil and suffering in the world.
   - I don't believe in God.
   - I do believe in God.
   - I choose to be good without needing to base that on some belief in god.
   - I think God is *within* everything in the universe.

- I think that God is like the Force; it's what holds the universe together.
- I used to believe in God when I was a little kid, but that's changing.
- I didn't used to believe in God when I was a little kid, but that's changing.
- I want to believe in God.
- I don't want to believe in God.
- I don't know what to believe in.
- I don't know enough to know what I believe about God.
- God is love.
- God contains both good and evil.
- God doesn't punish bad people or reward good people.
- God is an idea that people created to explain a complex universe.
- I spend a lot of time working on my ideas about God.
- "God" (noun) from the ancient Sanskrit, "that which is invoked or called upon."

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 white author and UU, Kurt Vonnegut)

   "I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without any expectation of rewards or punishments after I'm dead."

4. **UU Six Sources Review** (10 minutes)

   Teacher asks: Who can name one of our UU sources? As a group, can we name all six?

   Key words bolded:

   - ***Direct experience*** *of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
   - *Words and deeds of* ***prophetic people*** *which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
   - *Wisdom from the* ***world's religions*** *which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
   - ***Jewish and Christian teachings*** *which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
   - ***Humanist teachings*** *which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;*

- *Spiritual teachings of **Earth-centered traditions** which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

Teacher summarizes: Since, historically, Unitarianism and Universalism come out of the Christian tradition, we've talked about the fourth source—Jewish and Christian teachings. But we've also talked about personal experience of the sacred and words and deeds of prophetic voices. The Transcendentalists, who we learned about last week, were influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism! You have probably taken other RE classes that focused on Earth-centered traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, science, and myth. Today we are going to learn about Religious Humanism.

Question for discussion:

- Writer Kurt Vonnegut, a white UU and a Humanist, said: *"I am a Humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without any expectation of rewards or punishments after I'm dead."*

  a) In your own words, what is Vonnegut saying humanism means and what is he implying about religious beliefs and the afterlife?

  b) Do you think that belief in the *supernatural*—including God and an afterlife—is in conflict with fully appreciating human potential and responsibility? Why or why not?

  c) Do you think that affirmation of *naturalism*—that there is nothing greater or outside of the universe/multiverse—is in conflict with believing in God? Why or why not?

5. **What is a Religious Humanist?** (15 minutes)

Teacher summarizes:

- Humanist ideas began emerging in the late 1800s, after the Civil War (1861-65) and again after WWI (1914-18). Americans had seen so much bloodshed and suffering that they couldn't reconcile such suffering with belief in a loving god. While there are prominent African-American humanists (especially related to the Harlem Renaissance), humanism has primarily been a white movement.
- Modern humanism in America organized in 1933 when 34 white signers (which included 15 Unitarian ministers and 1 Universalist minister with 1 woman among them) drafted the first *Humanist Manifesto*, which challenged theism and formally set forth the concept of *human* responsibility for our world.
- Unitarians and Universalists, still separate churches, both wondered: "Could a church be open to members who didn't believe in God?"
- **Hand out attachment**, "Key Philosophical Points" and invite youth volunteers to read aloud:

- Religious humanists rejects supernatural explanations for the world, including God or gods, often identifying as either atheist or agnostic.
- Religious humanism upholds the intellect, trusting in the guidance of reason and the findings of science.
- Religious humanism suggests people can live ethically and improve human life without depending on God or possible afterlife for motivation.
- John Dietrich, white minister who served from 1916-1938 at First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, is considered by some to be the "Father of Religious Humanism."
- The "religious" in religious humanism (as opposed to secular humanism) suggests that religious *rituals*, *beloved community*, and some *sacred purpose greater than ourselves* can be a part of humanism.
- Frederick May Eliot, a white minister here at Unity Church (1917-1937) and distant relation to Louisa May Alcott, served as president of the American Unitarian Association. Eliot kept the debate between humanists and Theists from splitting the Unitarian denomination.
- Some humanists have created organizations outside Unitarianism, such as the *American Humanist Association, African Americans for Humanism*, and *Ethical Culture*.

- As a group, consider the statistics (back of attachment).

Questions for discussion:

- Do you think it's a good idea for humanists and theists to be part of the same church? Why or why not?
- Do any of you consider yourselves to be humanist?
- How would you explain to a friend from school that about half of the people in our church don't find God relevant to their religious life?

6. **Hymnal Hunt** (15 minutes)

   There's a joke that asks: *"How can you tell someone's a Unitarian Universalist?"*

   Answer*: "When a hymn is sung, they're the ones reading ahead to see if they agree with the words."*

   Activity: Divide youth into teams. Be the first team to identify what seems like *three humanist **hymns*** and *three humanist **readings*** in the hymnal.

   - Review how youth might recognize lyrics that come from a humanist perspective. What words will youth likely see? Not see? (See as examples #331 and #651)

- Have each youth choose a line or phrase from one of these readings or hymns, a line that clarifies something about the humanist tradition or simply touches their spirit. Have them write down the line. Give them a few minutes to prepare, then read or recite their line. Have youth tape their lines to the "Beliefs Abound" flipchart paper.

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 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).

8. **Announcement:**

   Next week is Family Sunday. As per our class agreements, please go to the worship service with family and/or friends. The following Sunday, Nov. 28, there is also no RE—Happy Thanksgiving.

9. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *"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
    - 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)