

UU Identity & History

Lesson 2: What is Unitarian?

9.26.2021

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

Materials: Flipchart, lesson attachments, box of props for Early Christianity, index cards, timeline and laminated events.

Time allotments: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

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 straight on a given subject. **Youth must try to speak non-stop for the full duration of their minute!** Teacher announces the topic, and first person begins speaking for one minute on that topic. Teacher calls time, and announces new topic for the second person to speak. Continue alternating as time permits.

Choose subjects to stimulate the imagination and which may be amusing. Topics might include: Whether a hotdog is a sandwich or a taco... Which animals would be rudest if they could talk... 10 things you can do with marshmallows... How many chickens it would take to take down an elephant... 10 things that everyone looks silly doing..... Fads or trends you would eliminate if you could... If all the States in the USA were represented by food, what food would each state be.

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. What is Unitarian? (15 minutes)

Teacher summarizes: Last week we talked about the seven UU principles and six sources of wisdom. Now we are going to go back to explore the historical roots of Unitarianism. So, what is a Unitarian? To answer this question, we have to dig up our roots in Christianity where Unitarian Christians had to decide what they really believed at several critical moments in Western religious history.

[Hand out lesson attachment “Our Religious Family Tree” that depicts the three Abrahamic faiths and the UU branch.]

- Ask youth to identify what branch both Unitarian and Universalism are listed under (Hint: Reformed).
- Invite youth to point out other traditions with which they are familiar.

Teacher summarizes: Unitarians are related to Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Muslims, and many others. 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.

Questions for discussion:

- What does the word monotheistic mean? (Hint: MONO means “one” and THEISTIC means “God.” The God that Jews and Christians call Yahweh, and Muslims call Allah, refers to the **one** God they worshipped.)
- Share one thing that you know about Christian beliefs or history. [Record ideas on the flipchart.]
- How many of you have friends who attend a Christian church? Unless those churches are in Transylvania, your 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 differing beliefs did not go away.

5. Setting the Stage (25 minutes)

- Spread out the props in a pile on a 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 a 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 “bzzz” 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 attachment with timeline of events and correlating props)

[Optional: If there is time, pass out index cards. Ask each youth to come up with their own caption to explain their prop. **Teachers take pictures** using their phone camera of the props with captions explaining the religious event they represent. Youth can choose to be in the pictures or not. *Please forward photos onto RE staff, to be printed and hung on classroom wall.*]

6. UU History (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 and 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. **Family Religious Tree:** Hand out attached copies of “My Family’s Religious Tree” for youth to take home. Encourage them to discuss with parents and learn about their own family’s religious ancestry and how they got to be who they are today.

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)