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“We Need Not Think Alike to Love Alike”: The Religious Community of Unitarian

Universalism

Emma Christen

Embedded within the work of most scholars in the study of religion is a definition of what religion is, and what elements something must contain in order to be considered a true religion. Of course this is a very complex endeavor, and so no universal conclusion has been drawn. Scholars disagree on which belief systems constitute a real religion, and what it is about some belief systems that disqualifies them from the category. One scholar’s definition suggests that religion is a “system of myths, dogmas, rites and ceremonies,”¹ while another says that religion is “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men [*sic*],”² and still another says that the most important element of religion is “its worldview, the basic, often unconscious presuppositions its followers hold about the nature of reality.”³ One common theme in each of these definitions is that they seem to suggest that followers of any particular religion must agree on certain fundamental truths such as the nature of life, death, or the supernatural.

There are, however, religious traditions that exist without requiring all of their followers to subscribe to the same beliefs about these subjects. This paper focuses on

¹ Emile Durkheim, “Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,” in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*, ed. Carl Olson, (Toronto, Wadsworth, 2003), 218.

² Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (U.S.A.: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

³ Rita Gross, “Defining Feminism, Religion, and the Study of Religion,” in *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 9.

Unitarian Universalism, a religion which in its current form is fairly young, but which has a long history in the larger movement of religious liberalism. Despite the lack of a concrete dogma, Unitarian Universalism still functions as a vibrant religious community, albeit a small one relative to other religious traditions in the United States. The members of this community may disagree with one another about things in which members of other religious communities are instructed to believe by religious authorities such as priests or pastors, and yet they can still come together under one united tradition.

This paper argues that religion does not need clear boundaries on who can be included in a religious tradition and who cannot—for example, certain rituals that a member must practice, or certain beliefs they must profess that they hold—in order to function. A definition of religion which might better apply to traditions like Unitarian Universalism would be one that does not focus on common beliefs, but instead on shared values and commitment to shared ways of living. One such definition comes from Paul Tillich, who states that “religion is more than a system of special symbols, rites, and emotions, directed toward a highest being; religion is ultimate concern; it is the state of being grasped by something unconditional, holy, absolute.”⁴

There is no trouble fitting Unitarian Universalism under this definition, as Unitarians use a set of seven principles as a guide for how to live their lives. These principles contain values such as the worth and dignity of every person, the freedom of each individual person to search for their own truth, and justice and equity for all people.⁵

⁴ Paul Tillich, “Religion and Secular Culture,” *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 2 (1946), 81.

⁵ David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago, Illinois: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000), 196–7.

Though Unitarian Universalists might disagree on issues such as the existence of God or of an afterlife, they come together in order to share a common way of living, and to support each other on their journeys toward finding an individual and personal spirituality.

Although Unitarian Universalism takes its name from two Christian denominations, it now identifies itself “not as non-Christian, but as more than Christian,”⁶ meaning that some of its followers might identify as Christian even though the religion as a whole has separated from Christianity. Originally, Unitarianism and Universalism were two separate denominations within Christianity, each with their own defining beliefs about the nature of the universe according to the Bible. The ideas that would eventually define Unitarianism came about in opposition to the Trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. They instead believed that God was one entity which had no equal, resulting in the name Unitarianism, referring to one God.⁷

The ideas that would become Universalism related to the afterlife, specifically to the existence of Hell. Some believed that the message of Jesus was more mystical, implying that “in the fullness of time all of creation would be restored to harmony with God,” or in other words, every person would be saved and enjoy eternity in Heaven.⁸⁸ This contrasted directly with the opinion of many members of the religious elite in early Christianity, who believed that only those who accepted Christ would be saved. This idea of universal salvation is what contributed to the name, Universalism. It was branded a

⁶ John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, Revised ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1998), 91.

⁷ Bumbaugh, 8–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

heresy by the Christian church of the seventeenth century, as was Unitarianism.⁹ Early Unitarians and Universalists were among those who left England seeking religious freedom in the “New World.”⁹

From its very beginning, the Unitarian denomination was surrounded by controversy originating from the mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States. In the early nineteenth century, just after the American Unitarian Association was founded, more conservative Christian leaders accused Unitarians of being “lukewarm to religion, to morality, to piety [...] and that as a consequence of Unitarian dominance vice and crime had increased in Boston and moral values were in decline.”¹⁰ Many of the ministers and laypeople that we now regard as “Transcendentalists” were Unitarian, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is still considered an inspiration by contemporary Unitarian Universalists. Emerson was even considered a radical within Unitarian circles, with many ministers quickly ensuring that they would not be associated with him.¹¹

Similar controversies can be found surrounding early Universalism in the United States. Universalists were involved in one of the court cases that began the quest for the total separation of church and state in Massachusetts, in 1783: after being suspended from the Anglican Parish Church, sixteen former members and a minister created their own church, and requested to stop paying taxes to a church they no longer attended.¹² The minister in question, John Murray, had been banned from preaching in many New

⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹² Ibid., 149.

England churches, charged with performing weddings illegally due to improper ordination, and had eggs and stones thrown at him during his speeches.¹³ This commitment of early Unitarians and Universalists to resisting religious authority can still be seen clearly in many Unitarian Universalist communities today.

While an official merger between the two denominations did not occur until 1961, the idea of combining the two traditions extends as far back as 1865, the year of the first recorded vote on the possibility of merging.¹⁴ Clear signs that a merger might be reasonable are visible along the way, such as the membership of both denominations in the National Federation of Religious Liberals, as well as in the Free Church of America movement—the clearest sign, however, could be found among the youth groups of both denominations, who as early as the 1930s largely supported the idea of merger. They were encouraged by adult supervisors not to meet together until the national associations of each denomination agreed to merge, which would not happen until decades later.¹⁵

When a merger finally did occur, the combination of Unitarianism and Universalism became something essentially completely different than either denomination had been on its own. Whereas normally when two denominations attempt to combine it results in a splitting between those who agree with the merger and those who do not, in Unitarian Universalism this largely did not occur: the first president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Dana Greeley, predicted correctly that “the growth and vitality that had characterized Unitarianism in the decade of the 1950s would be

¹³ *Ibid.*, 148–9.

¹⁴ George N. Marshall, *Challenge of a Liberal Faith*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Pyramid Publications for the Church of the Larger Fellowship, 1966), 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

enhanced by the merger.”¹⁶ Almost immediately after the merger, Greeley urged his new fellow Unitarian Universalists to join the fight against segregation in the United States, which inspired droves of mostly white laypeople and clergy members alike to join Martin Luther King Jr.’s march in Selma, Alabama. One Unitarian Universalist minister and one layperson were killed as a direct result of their participation in that march; James Reeb, the minister, is another Unitarian Universalist seen as an inspiration in the modern tradition.¹⁸

Along with the focus on practical and action-based responses to social justice issues, another hallmark of the newly established Unitarian Universalism is an emphasis on freedom and the right of an individual to choose how to embark on their own quest for spiritual awakening. With the merger came an intense emphasis on the ability of the individual to create a personalized faith, criticizing traditions that emphasize teaching members a pre-established creed rather than allowing members to come to a creed by themselves. The Unitarian Universalist church

“makes no other offer than this: to help a person develop the faith that is in him [*sic*]. Do not come to a Unitarian Universalist church to find a religion, to learn beliefs, or to be given a faith. Come only when you reach the point where all external faiths are rejected and you are ready to begin with the bedrock of your own being, experience, and character to construct the faith that is meaningful to you.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Bumbaugh, 184–7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁷ Marshall, 45.

In line with the resistance to conformity mentioned earlier, Unitarian Universalists were and are today reluctant to be given anything they could create for themselves.

Unitarian Universalism therefore prides itself on being a community of independent free thinkers who use the democratic process in order to make decisions within churches as well as at the level of national organization. One description states in a tongue-in-cheek manner that Unitarian Universalism attempts “to maintain a religious establishment for the unestablished, to build an organization for the anti-organizational man [*sic*], to maintain a church for free spirits and free thinkers.”¹⁸ Beneath the humor lies a real truth about the religion and its members: as much as Unitarian Universalists dislike or distrust the authority that can arise from the establishment of an institution, they came together to form their own kind of institution regardless.

This emphasis on personal freedom is expressed in one of the seven principles that Unitarian Universalists use as a guide. The fourth principle affirms and promotes “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” which allows members to define their spirituality based on their own experiences.²¹ Part of this involves looking into various sources, often in other traditions, in order to explore their spiritual significance.¹⁹ Related, the third principle calls for “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,”²⁰ a value that provides the basis of Unitarian Universalism as a tight-knit community. While members of this community may come to extremely

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹ Bumbaugh, 196.

¹⁹ Forrest Church, “Introduction” in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* Revised ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1998), xx.

²⁰ Bumbaugh, 196.

different conclusions, they can still come together to support one another in their learning and to discuss their various ideas.

One way in which Unitarian Universalists discover their own personal spirituality is through meditation or deep thinking, as the tradition is rooted firmly in the idea of an internal spiritual exploration. While discussion is one important way to encounter the spiritual, there is also immense value in remaining silent and paying attention to one's own thoughts and feelings—this is one reason why Unitarian Universalist religious services often offer a time for quiet reflection or meditation.²¹ Sharing knowledge with the rest of the community can only happen after one has looked inside oneself to find one's own position on the topic at hand. Another factor that unites Unitarian Universalists into one community is the fact that “everyone does not think alike but all alike think.”²² Instead of disagreement separating the community, when it occurs in a kind and respectful manner, it can lead rather to the community coming closer together.²³

As a tradition often aligned with humanism—a viewpoint which emphasizes the capabilities and importance of humans rather than the divine—Unitarian Universalism too places value on reason in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge. One of the sources from which members may draw inspiration is “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.”²⁴ A healthy balance between head and heart is emphasized, which helps to integrate both an emotional as well as a logical response to the pain and greatness of

²¹ Marshall, 133.

²² *Ibid.*, 120.

²³ Church, “Introduction,” xxii.

²⁴ Bumbaugh, 197.

human life. The goal of Unitarian Universalism is “to make the religious more rational and the rational more religious,” as members aspire to maintain a practical aspect of their faith which may ground some of their loftier ideas.²⁸

An idea that many Unitarian Universalists consider to be the most important aspect of their faith is compassion for all people, based on the idea from the first principle that each person possesses an “inherent worth and dignity.”²⁵ This is something that cannot be removed, no matter what abhorrent ideas that person may hold, nor what horrific acts they may have committed. In this system of thought, every person’s humanity is acknowledged first, regardless of how inhuman a person may appear to be as a result of their ideas or actions. A person’s choices are not necessarily considered to be right, but any choice they make does not remove their value as a human being.

Unitarian Universalism as a tradition “believes in the supreme worth of every human personality [...] This modern faith asserts the goodness of man [*sic*]; it sees man [*sic*] as the child of God or as many of us would say, as the child of the universe.”²⁶ This is one of the clearest examples of how modern Unitarian Universalism has grown out of one or both of the previous denominations: Unitarian Universalists today still affirm the universal goodness of all people. Related to the focus on humanism, in the words of a layperson, “Unitarian Universalism is faith in people, hope for tomorrow’s child, confidence in a continuity that spans all time. It looks not to a perfect heaven, but toward

²⁸ Buehrens and Church, 170.

²⁵ Bumbaugh, 196.

²⁶ Marshall, 32.

a good earth.”²⁷ Instead of placing the focus vertically, on divine love, Unitarian Universalists focus a majority of that love horizontally, toward their fellow humans.

Built off of the foundation of compassion is Unitarian Universalism’s focus on social justice, and getting involved in one’s community in order to effect positive change. The religious and spiritual foundation for social justice is often discussed in sermons, bringing a sense of reverence to the practices of organizing protests, creating community service projects, and attempting to educate others about important issues. As a result of this, Unitarian Universalists “must not only nurture a deeper appreciation for the wonder and majesty of life, but renew our sense of responsibility for how the story we are telling will finally turn out.”²⁸ As a direct result of Unitarian Universalists’ deep compassion and love for humanity, they are inspired to go into the world and awaken that practical aspect of their beliefs.

Much of this practical element has to do with the commitment to “justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” from the second principle.³³ As a result of believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, Unitarian Universalists are called to actively defend the rights of oppressed and marginalized groups in society. This contributes to the focus on “deeds not creeds,” meaning that “all that matters is whether we are willing to live up to the promise of our own faith.”²⁹ If, as a community, Unitarian

²⁷ Ed Schempp, quoted in Buehrens, John A., and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, 77.

²⁸ Buehrens, John A., and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, Revised ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1998), 170.

³³ Bumbaugh, 196.

²⁹ Buehrens and Church, 49.

Universalists are not willing to put actions to the words of their beliefs, then the words themselves have little to no power.

In fact, it is through community that Unitarian Universalists find the strength to continue attempting to live their values. Through the experience of coming together, members commit to “supporting one another in our ethical and spiritual living, attempting to bear witness to our highest values in our everyday lives, and in that way having a positive influence on community life.”³⁰ This is one of the issues on which Unitarian Universalists need not argue: it is vitally important for members to commit to making their values visible in their lives outside of their religious community. One benefit of coming together in a community that shares this value is the fact that members are able to share strategies and practices with each other, which helps each person to remain committed to their values.

Almost paradoxically, the fact that so many Unitarian Universalists have very different beliefs and practices contributes to the supportive space of the wider community. Without this amount of difference, it would be difficult for members to learn together—instead, knowledge would remain more static, without members having the ability to become inspired by another person’s point of view. Members believe “that is why we need each other, our many ways of seeing, that together we may rejoice, and see clearly, and find the many keys to abundant life.”³¹ As they share different ways of living

³⁰ Ibid., 177.

³¹ Greta W. Crosby, quoted in Buehrens, John A., and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* Revised ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1998), 81–2.

their shared values, members may receive invaluable gifts from one another, which they may not have received if this knowledge had never been shared.

Along these lines, Francis David, another influential figure for contemporary Unitarian Universalists, believed that religious pluralism would strengthen rather than divide a community, and that “we need not think alike to love alike.”³² This is a vital way to understand Unitarian Universalist community, as it emphasizes the fact that members share the same values, such as love, even when they disagree on aspects of spirituality. This can be understood as the “ultimate concern” from Paul Tillich’s definition of religion: Unitarian Universalists share an ultimate concern for the way that humans live on Earth, which is carried out through values such as compassion, justice, and freedom. In this way, the differences in the ways that members view the world and its mysteries are brought together by a common way of navigating and living within this world.

Throughout this paper, my own experience as a Unitarian Universalist is embedded, as it is a bias I cannot simply remove. My family and I became a part of this community when I was a young child, and it has since influenced me in countless ways. Through Unitarian Universalism, I discovered a reverence for the experiences in life that moved me too thoroughly to be able to explain, and found that many others shared this same feeling. I discovered a caring, welcoming, and accepting community in which I was able to grow into the person I am today.

As a result, I often feel very defensive when people around me suggest that Unitarian Universalism is not a real religion: in the words of John A. Buehrens, “we may not be conventionally pious, but we all experience life, and there are religious dimensions

³² Buehrens and Church, 58.

to explore within that experience.”³³ The Unitarian Universalist community is the place where I learned to share this experience with others, which to me makes it inherently religious. Along these same lines, I find that the transcendent power that I experience during a Unitarian Universalist service is not any less powerful? than what I hear described by my peers who follow more conventionally recognized religions. This makes sense, in that “the main difference between a faith drawn from direct experience and one founded in revelation lies only in the source of our beliefs, not in their respective transformational or redemptive power.”³⁴ Thus, the sense of reverence that I feel when attending a Unitarian Universalist church service is no lesser than any similar sense felt by members of majority traditions.

In addition, it was in Unitarian Universalist spaces where I was exposed to the beliefs and practices of various different religions around the world. Without the learning space provided by the youth group I attended, I may never have discovered the love for studying religion that led me to pursue a degree in the subject. I have always found it very poignant that the program for children within many Unitarian Universalist congregations is called Religious Explorations rather than Religious Education: knowledge was presented to me without judgments or conclusions, allowing me to form my own opinions. In the words of famous Unitarian Universalist Adlai Stevenson, “here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping

³³ Ibid., 35.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own."³⁵

As much as I love and appreciate the Unitarian Universalist community, I have often found reason to critique it. While members attempt to live up to the values to which we have committed, I have seen glaring examples of members going against our shared values, seemingly without any awareness of the fact that they are doing so. The most common example I have seen is the abandonment of valuing each person's worth and dignity in exchange for a fervent commitment to values such as justice and freedom. An example from Forrest Church suggests that "because of our tradition and our self-image as a 'faith of the free,' some people who come to our churches calling themselves 'free spirits' are hell-bent on fighting the evil of an organized anything."³⁶ As this example suggests, many people prefer to focus on the evils of belonging to an institution such as fundamentalist Christianity instead of remembering that fundamentalist Christians have inherent worth and dignity no matter how shocking or horrifying we may find their ideas.

As inclusive as Unitarian Universalist communities aspire to be, subtle methods of exclusion permeate regardless. One example of this can be seen in the simple demographics of members of the religion across the United States. As of 1987, Unitarian Universalists were 70% middle- to upper-class according to individual income, with 34% of members having completed graduate-level education or higher, and 97.5% of members identifying as Caucasian or white.³⁷ Admittedly, these figures have most likely changed

³⁵ Marshall, 43.

³⁶ Buehrens and Church, 161.

³⁷ Josiah R. Bartlett and Laile E. Bartlett, *A Religion for the "Non-Religious": An Overview of Unitarian Universalism* (Berkeley, CA: Bartlett, 1990), 9.

since the 1980s, but the overwhelming amount of societal privilege among Unitarian Universalists remains. Because of this, the emphasis on how different members of the community are from each other seems somewhat disingenuous. In reality, members have even more in common than their commitment to the principles.

At the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in June of 2015, attended by thousands of members from across the country, the Reverend Marlin Lavanhar called attention to this disparity in a sermon titled “For Just Such a Time as This.” He told stories of how he had seen members of his congregation react negatively when another member revealed that they held a belief or practiced a ritual outside of the norm within Unitarian Universalism. The example he used was of a former Pentecostal Christian who still considered speaking in tongues a part of his religious practice. To a more logical, well-educated Unitarian Universalist, this practice may seem purposeless and even ridiculous, and this member feared that he would be seen as superstitious if he were to talk about this practice with other members of his congregation.

Reverend Lavanhar critiqued the necessity for members of his religious community to “put on their Sunday face,” or in other words, to hide beliefs that may shock or dismay fellow members. He admitted that “if coming to my congregation means pretending that you don’t have any beliefs or longings that fit outside of a narrow, mostly white, middle-class, progressive norm... Then most people probably don’t want to attend my church... Because that’s not a church as much as it’s a spiritual and emotional closet.”³⁸ He continued by calling for a “coming out” within Unitarian Universalist

³⁸ Lavanhar, Marlin. “For Just Such a Time As This” (2015):

<http://www.uua.org/ga/virtual/2015/worship/slt>.

communities nationwide: he asked for people with unconventional beliefs or practices to make these things known, and requested that fellow members be receptive to them. He shared that he wanted to be a part of creating a religious community where “I can be held in love for who I really am and despite what I believe or don’t believe.”³⁹ This, he said, was a church to which he wanted to belong.

Being there and listening to Reverend Lavanhar speak helped me immensely to see that, despite the Unitarian Universalists who struggle to live up to the admittedly high standards of our values, there are many of us who are honest in the fact that we do not have all the answers. We are still learning how to express our values in actions, not just in words. After all, “religion has little to do with a body of beliefs or practices; it represents a gradual process of awakening to the depths and possibilities of life itself.”⁴⁰ I am comfortable in the knowledge that Unitarian Universalists are still awakening to the great depth of meaning in our own values. We are not perfect, but we are committed to learning together how to live more ethical lives.

When more narrow definitions of religion neglect to recognize that having shared beliefs is not the only way to bring a religious community together, they leave out the depth of experience possible in traditions like Unitarian Universalism. Limited by the assumption that members of a religious community must interpret the same symbols in exactly the same way, some scholars miss entirely the beauty of a community that often disagrees, and that delights in these disagreements as much as they do in the agreements. If scholars were instead to look through the lens of ultimate concern, they would find that

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Buehrens and Church, 11.

shared values are enough to bring a community together, without each member needing to see the world in exactly the same way. Also, when considering a definition of a “holy” experience, such as in Tillich’s definition, holy can be taken to mean “spiritual” or “inspiring,” not just the experience of something that the text of a religious tradition declares to be sacred. It is enough to explore spirituality and to have spiritual experiences in the supportive company of others who are doing the same work.

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