

- Who is a Historical Unitarian? –

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As young Unitarians, we spend a great deal of our time thinking about our history. And today, we'd like to take a critical look at who we claim as UU. There are many figures from our past who we like to talk about as founding members of our religious movement, but the way we come to these conclusions can be pretty complicated.

First off, how do we judge Unitarians and Universalists from the past? Should we be using our own ideas and prejudices? Is it valid for us, as 21st century observers to look back and apply our own thoughts about morality and Unitarianism to people who lived long before there even was a set of decided-upon principles? Can questionable actions be excused by simply saying that people are products of their time? Someone can be seen as a hero now and vilified in the future, especially by a group like us, who often change our beliefs based on new ideas in science and social justice - so should we keep on changing who we claim as UU as our standards change?

Should we decide based on whether or not they identified as UU - even if the words Unitarian and Universalist had drastically different meanings at the time? Or should we claim people who lived lives we would recognize as Unitarian, with the label they chose for themselves being irrelevant?

UU HISTORY

It might be helpful for us to have a bit of background information, just so we're all on the same page, so please excuse us for sneaking a tiny little history lecture in here.

Unitarianism and Universalism started as two separate beliefs, Unitarianism getting started in Poland and Transylvania in the Reformation period, and Universalism a century or two later. Unitarianism originally meant the belief that the Christian God was one entity, as opposed to three, which was the reigning doctrine of the time.

Universalism originally meant the belief in universal salvation: that all souls would be saved. Both these faiths were present in England and then in America in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Unitarianism really matured in the 19th century, and in the early 1800s was in fact the dominant religion of parts of New England. It was in this period that transcendentalism began to grow out of the Unitarian ideas which prized our independent and free reason, or what modern UUs might recognize as our fourth principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Transcendentalism represents the quest for deeper spiritual experiences, as opposed to what some were beginning to feel was a dry, intellectual, un-experiential faith.

Eventually these new ideas were incorporated back into mainstream Unitarianism.

Unitarian and Universalist churches had a history of producing political activists already at that time, and both transcendentalism and social justice grew more prominent within the faith as time went on. In 1961, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, and work began on forming our shared principles and sources, though they weren't finalised in their current form until 1984. The CUC formed in 1961 as a part of the UUA, and separated from them officially in 2002. This explains why we here are the Unitarian Church of Vancouver instead of the UU Church - this church has been around since 1909.

FLUIDITY OF BELIEF

So we are a young religion. Even younger when one thinks that our current shape has only existed since 1961.

In the time since the first Unitarians began gathering in Transylvania and Poland we have changed a great deal, and especially in modern times, these changes have often been because of advancements and new ideas in science and social justice.

Our 7th principle, interpreted by many as a nod to environmental concerns, was the one adopted last, in 1984. In the first part of the twentieth century, many Unitarian and Universalist churches were essentially Christian, and while we still have many Christian UUs today, and Christian influences in our congregations, our churches themselves have become gathering places for a much more diverse group of people.

This begs the question, how does this fluidity of belief affect who we are as Unitarians? Off the top of my head, I can think of no other religion which allows this kind of flexibility in its central beliefs. In our relatively short history we've shown that it can take only a few decades or even just a few years to change our perspective as a religious movement. How does this affect the way we look back?

What does it mean to us to look back at historical Unitarians and Universalists when, as we'll see in the last part of the service, we may not have anything in common with them in terms of values or beliefs?

How do we understand our heritage then? We have a couple of options.

We can, and often do, idolize leaders from our past, without paying much attention to some of their choices which we today would find questionable or in some cases

downright immoral. We can praise historical figures as ahead-of-their-time UU thinkers, even when they were never involved in a Unitarian or Universalist congregation.

On the other hand, we can say that our UU identity is built off of our shared principles, and therefore anyone who has chosen to go against these principles should not be considered UU, but this poses problems as well, not least in the fact that our principles weren't present in their current form until we'd already been around as a religion (or as religions plural) for a couple of centuries.

If we, a movement who adapts to seemingly every scientific or sociological change, start judging our past by our present metric, we'd never be able to stop judging. We'd have to get together every year or two - probably in a committee - to decide who's a valid representation of UU history and who isn't.

Even if you think that's a good idea, our principles and beliefs are pretty hard to live up to for someone who is living in the present, when they're all nicely defined for us. I don't know about you, but I fail to live up to our principles on at least a weekly basis, if not more.

So a hardline stance in either direction - either praising everyone who ever had a passing thought about the trinity, or condemning anybody who didn't live as an omnibenevolent saint - is probably not the answer.

For a religious group with this kind of fluid attitude to our most important values, maybe the answer is somewhere down the middle.

INSECURE RELIGION

So now you can see that we actually have a very short history, at least compared to your average religion, and that we are unique in the way our creedless belief system allows us to evolve. Some people have even argued that this is why we feel the need to

claim all these famous dead people as our own - some people think that we might want to have all these representatives because, as a small, young, and sort of weird religion, we might be a tiny bit insecure.

Why else do we need these people? Having historical references to inspire us and show us how to truly live our principles is great, and really useful. But some of these people we celebrate aren't exactly great role models.

EXAMPLES

We've got three examples of Unitarians of the past who are often celebrated, to try and illustrate our points a little better. You can see pictures of them on the front of the order of service today.

First is Thomas Jefferson. He tended to refer to himself as Unitarian in the non-Trinitarian sense of the word, and he did occasionally attend a UU church, though he mainly worshipped at, donated to, and was involved in an Episcopalian church. When discussing his most deeply-held religious beliefs, he once wrote "I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know," a quote which fuels the debate over whether he really was a Unitarian or not. Regardless, Jefferson is widely celebrated, and there's even a room in this church named after him.

It's obvious why we like to talk about him so much - he's a pretty prestigious catch. Principal author of the Declaration of Independence, third president of the United States, and generally famous person. But there are some UU's who are against our praising him.

At the UUA's 1993 General Assembly, a group led by some influential black UU ministers said that "Thomas Jefferson's role in the racial history of the United States is not one which African Americans, native Americans, or others victimized by the 'founding fathers' wish to honor." This started a debate which continued for the next four

years, about whether the UUA district named after Jefferson should be renamed. Eventually, votes were cast 75-51 in favour of changing the name - however, those of you who've been keeping up on your UU politics, will know that there still is a Thomas Jefferson district, because the UUA requires a two-thirds majority for that kind of vote.

Though the specifics of that debate were about one district's name, we can clearly see how it represents the much larger question of whether or not we want to claim him as one of ours. Yes, he supported democracy, the jury system, and religious freedoms - all very UU ideas. At certain time in his life, he even legally defended slaves seeking freedom. That is, until he did the math and found that he made a four percent profit every year on the births of black children - at that point he became even more evasive about emancipation, a concept he had never been very supportive of.

The question that is really being debated when we talk about Jefferson is not about specific things we've named after him. It's about whether or not a slave owner - someone who believed that their whiteness and colonial position gave them the right to own human beings - can ever be celebrated. Our UU claim on Jefferson from a theological standpoint is not the strongest, though an argument can definitely be made. But more importantly, why do we keep raising up this man? And should we continue to do so?

It gets better though - not all of our forbearers are as morally complicated as Jefferson. They're not quite as famous, but you've probably seen things around named after John Adams and especially after his wife, Abigail Adams. She, like Jefferson, called herself Unitarian in the non-Trinitarian sense, though she attended a Unitarian church almost all her life. She also wrote at one time that she believed in a religion without creed, something modern Unitarians will surely recognize.

In her politics, a field she was very involved in, Adams proves that the old "product of their time" argument doesn't always hold up - or at least, that some people can avoid it. A contemporary of Jefferson (born only a year after him) she was vehemently anti-

slavery and anti-racism throughout her life. She was known to put this principle into practice, and when a young black boy came to her asking to be taught to read and write, she enrolled him in her local school, though she received quite the backlash from her neighbours. She was also a fierce advocate for women's rights - it was she who said that "all men would be tyrants if they could." She argued that women should be more than just companions to their husbands and shouldn't have to be subject to laws that did not respect or benefit them.

Abigail Adams suggests that it's possible for us to find UU heroes who we don't need to make excuses for.

But Abigail Adams is not the majority either. The majority of UUs of the past - and of the present - are people who weren't all good and weren't all bad. People who we can learn from in both their mistakes and their victories.

Susan B Anthony is one example. Anthony always called herself a Quaker, but attended services at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester for over fifty years. We won't go over every amazing thing she did, mostly because it would take us all day, but just trust us, there were many. She was a key suffragette, and one of the first leaders of the modern women's movement, which, as we saw in the massive marches all around the world yesterday, is still going strong. The American amendment that gave women the right to vote was popularly known as the Anthony Amendment. And she did all of this as a single woman, in a time when even daring to be an active unmarried woman was radical.

When she was young, she also collected petitions on behalf of abolitionist organizations. But despite working closely with abolitionists for most of her career as an activist, her thoughts on race are the part of her legacy that has been called into question. Particularly, this quote: "An oligarchy of learning, where the educated govern the ignorant, or even an oligarchy of race, where the Saxon rules the African, might be endured; but this oligarchy of sex, which makes father, brothers, husband, sons, the

oligarchs over the mother and sisters, the wife and daughters, of every household - which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects, carries dissension, discord, and rebellion into every home of the nation."

The idea that Anthony believed that the rights of black Americans were not as important as her rights as a woman is hard to reconcile with our vision of her as a tireless advocate for what is right in the world. Should we still idolise her? Should we still celebrate her as one of our UU heroes?

CONCLUSION

Maybe we have to be more nuanced than that. Maybe we can celebrate how Susan B Anthony championed the first principle through her work with women's rights, but also acknowledge how she turned away from that principle in some of her ideas about race. To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person is a very big idea, and in some ways Susan B Anthony excelled at this, and in some ways she did not.

Our principles call us to think very, very big, and to do some difficult things. Each of us knows there have been times when we have succeeded, and times when we have failed. That doesn't mean that we should be ok with those failures - quite the opposite, we should be constantly learning from them - but it does mean that we have to accept that when we look back at historical UUs, we're often setting what is either an impossibly high standard or a perilously low one.

We can't all be Abigail Adams, but we can try not to be Thomas Jefferson. For us in the present, we should look at the history of our movement as a story full of both visionary ideals and tragic lapses. And in the words of yet another famous UU, Theodore Parker, let ours be a history which bends towards justice.