

There's no getting around it: Unitarian Universalism is a radical religion. Before there were Unitarians and Universalists in the United States, churches were devoted to theology, scripture, and dogma. They changed that, and that is what makes Unitarian Universalists radical.

The dictionary defines "radical" as "favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions." By that definition, Unitarian Universalism was born as a radical religion. Prior to the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325 C.E., which established the Trinity as dogma, Christians were free to choose from a variety of beliefs about the man Jesus. Among those was the belief that Jesus was less than God, but sent by God on a divine mission. Those who denied the divinity of Jesus later came to be called Unitarian, which literally means the unity or oneness of God, rather than the belief in the trinity, God manifested in the father, the son, and the holy ghost. Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era (C.E.) was universal salvation. This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus a Universalist believed that all people would be saved. For centuries those who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted for their "radical" view of Christianity.

Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics, which simply means they want the right to choose what they believe without regard to established dogma or creed. Though both were seen as liberal religions with many common ideals, each traveled their own path before merging in 1961. Both came to believe that lasting truth is found in all religions and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, class, or sexual orientation. Growing out of this inclusive theology was a lasting impetus in both denominations to create a more just society.

Today, I want to talk about some of the great Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists who have changed the world by their commitment to social justice as a spiritual act. Though our membership is small in numbers compared to other religions, we have had an inordinate impact on the world around us. Indeed, more than 50 Unitarians or Universalists have appeared on U.S. postage stamps.

From its very beginning, the precepts of Unitarian Universalist faith have had significant political implications. Unitarians and their beliefs were a major influence on the founding of the US political system. Indeed, half of our first six presidents—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams—and several other founding fathers, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, were Universalists or Unitarians. Universalists and their beliefs were a major influence on US religion and culture. But it is important to remember that Unitarian Universalist congregations are religious communities, not secular activist organizations. Our primary purpose is not achieving political goals— although that may be a significant activity—but rather building relationships and meaning based on equality and justice. For the past two centuries Unitarian Universalists have been at the

forefront of movements for peace, abolition, civil rights, suffrage and women's rights, among others, working to free people from whatever bonds may oppress them.

Abolition

Perhaps the earliest social issue Unitarians and Universalists addressed in the U.S. was the abolition of slavery. Universalists made the first official denominational challenge to slavery when they adopted a resolution at their 1790 convention in Philadelphia that holding slaves was "inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Saviour." The resolution recommended that the country adopt prudent measures for the gradual abolition of slavery of the negroes and that their children be taught English literature and the principles of the gospel.

The resolution was written in 1785 by **Dr. Benjamin Rush**, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the foremost advocate of abolition among Universalists. Though not as well known as some of his contemporaries, Dr. Rush was a seminal figure in the development of the U.S. Government and served as Surgeon General in the Continental Army. The highlight of his involvement in abolishing slavery might be the pamphlet he wrote that appeared in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York in 1773 entitled "An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, upon Slave-Keeping." In this first of his many attacks on the social evils of his day, he not only assailed the slave trade, but the entire institution of slavery. Dr. Rush argued scientifically that Negroes were not by nature intellectually or morally inferior. Any apparent evidence to the contrary was only the perverted expression of slavery, which "is so foreign

to the human mind, that the moral faculties, as well as those of the understanding are debased, and rendered torpid by it."

As a group, Universalists usually argued against slavery on moral and religious grounds, rather than for political or economic reasons. Using their unique theology, they believed that humanity was "one great family" that would ultimately "share one common destiny."

The Unitarians were very active in the movement though their ministers were split into three camps: Abolitionists, who called for an immediate end to slavery; moderates, who were a majority and strongly antislavery, but preferred to contain it and see its gradual abolishment; and finally, an especially cautious group of moderates who believed that religious bodies should not take stands on political issues.

William Ellery Channing, the leader of the Unitarians, held moderate views but believed that a human being could not rightfully be held and used as property. His greatest contribution may have come as an influence on others through his ability to link religion and abolition.

There were a number of ministers who experienced differences with their congregations over involvement in reform issues. Outspoken pastors risked their jobs as many wealthy Unitarians were leaders in the textile industry, which used slave labor. **Samuel J. May** was among the most eloquent and persuasive abolitionists without being too divisive. In 1845 he published *A Protest against American Slavery by One Hundred and Seventy-Three Unitarian Ministers*.

John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, was particularly effective using legislative means to combat slavery in the nine years he served in the House of Representatives following his presidency. He spearheaded

the battle in the House over a gag rule that prohibited Congress from even discussing the issue of slavery. Despite his advanced age and threats of censure and even assassination, Adams sponsored petition after petition to keep the issue open to debate. His efforts resulted in a significant victory for freedom of speech with the defeat of the gag rule in 1844.

The truly radical Unitarian position was expressed by **Theodore Parker**, who labeled slavery “the great national sin.” Parker made many enemies by attacking not only the slaveholders but also the Northern economic elite who profited from and perpetuated slavery through their banks, mills, and shipping interests. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Parker wrote his sermons with a sword in the drawer under his ink stand and a loaded pistol in the flap of his desk. The arms were appropriate, as Parker soon enlisted others to the possible use of armed resistance. His vigilance committee evolved into a conspiratorial cabal of six prominent Northerners, who supplied the radical John Brown with money and weapons. The armed conflict they were materially and emotionally advocating became a reality the year after Parker died in 1860.

Women’s Rights and Suffrage

Unitarians and Universalists were also early leaders in the women’s rights and suffrage (or right-to-vote) movement in the United States and elsewhere. First Lady **Abigail Adams**, wife of second president John Adams, was one of the first to make the connection between the freedom the revolutionaries were seeking and the freedom of women. She spoke up for married women’s property rights and more opportunities for women, particularly in education. She believed that women should not submit to

laws clearly not made in their interest and should not content themselves with the role of being decorous companions to their husbands. They should educate themselves and be recognized for their intellectual capabilities, for their ability to shoulder responsibilities of managing household, family, and financial affairs, and for their capacity morally to guide and influence the lives of their children and husbands.

In a celebrated letter of March, 1776, she exhorted her husband to "remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could."

The most important feminist writer in the 19th century was **Margaret Fuller**. In 1845, she published a landmark book that provided the intellectual foundation to the feminist movement called *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In it she advocated the abolishment of the laws that gave men total rights over women and children, and said that every occupation should become open to women. Fuller wrote that as men realize that *some* men have not had a fair chance, they will realize that *no* woman has had a fair chance.

The Universalists were the first to ordain a woman to the ministry with full denominational recognition. **Olympia Brown** achieved this position in 1863 after a difficult struggle to be accepted. Universalism had long been receptive to women taking important church roles as a reflection of a theology that promoted the spiritual equality of all. By 1882 there were 30 female Universalist preachers, but they frequently encountered prejudice, as did Brown when she was eventually forced out of her pulpit in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Brown became active in the fight for suffrage and

was one of the few activists from the 19th century who lived to see the day when women could vote. The Unitarians ordained their first woman minister, **Celia Burleigh**, in 1871. Today more than half of all Unitarian Universalist ministers are women.

Lucy Stone was one of the most important workers for women's suffrage and other women's rights in the 19th century. Her speech in 1850 converted Susan B. Anthony to the cause. In her lifetime, she achieved a number of important "firsts". She was the first woman in Massachusetts to earn a college degree and even achieved a "first" at death by being the first person in New England to be cremated. She's remembered most, however, for being the first woman in the United States to keep her own name after marriage.

The best-known proponent for suffrage was likely **Susan B. Anthony**. Raised a Quaker, both her parents and her sister Mary attended the second Women's Rights Convention at the Unitarian Church in 1848 and signed the Declaration of Sentiments. In 1851 Susan met **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and a 50-year friendship and collaboration of political organizing developed. Together they founded the National Women's Suffrage Association and published *The Revolution*, a weekly paper about the suffrage movement. In 1872, she defied the law and cast a vote, for which she was arrested, put on trial, and fined, which she refused to pay. For 45 years she traveled the United States by stagecoach, wagon, carriage, and train giving 75-100 speeches a year for the cause. An organizing genius, her canvassing plan is still used today by political and grassroots organizations. She died in 1906, 14 years before the 19th Amendment enfranchised women but it likely would have never happened without her.

Peace Movement

Religious liberals have also long been associated with peace movements. Even before the development of formal organizations, Universalist **Benjamin Rush** advocated for a Peace Office in the federal government, after he noted that the Constitution called for a War Department. An active antiwar movement led by Unitarian minister **Noah Worcester** began with the War of 1812. In December 1814, he published [A Solemn Review of the Custom of War](#), still considered one of the best pieces of anti-war literature ever committed to print, and as relevant today as then. In 1815, he founded the [Massachusetts Peace Society](#), serving as its secretary until 1828. From 1819 to 1828 he edited and wrote most of the content for [The Friend of Peace](#), a quarterly periodical of the Society. He felt that the life and teachings of Christ was the primary impulse for the authority for pacifism.

Unitarian **Julia Ward Howe** is probably best remembered for writing the lyrics to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* in 1861. After the Civil War, however, she began a crusade for universal peace and especially advocated for a Mother's Peace Day. Written in response to the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War, her proclamation called on women to use their position as mothers to influence society in fighting for an end to all wars. She called for women to stand up against the unjust violence of war through their roles as wife and mother, to protest the futility of their sons killing other mothers' sons.

Rev. John Haynes Holmes was certainly the most controversial Unitarian peace activist of the first half of the 20th century. Shortly before America entered World War 1, he announced his pacifism in a sermon to

the Community titled "A Statement To My People on the Eve of War."

"When hostilities begin," he said, "it is universally assumed that there is but a single service which a loyal citizen can render to the state: that of bearing arms and killing the enemy. Will you understand me if I say, humbly and regretfully, that this I cannot, and will not, do. No order of president or governor, no law of nation or state, no loss of reputation, freedom or life, will persuade me or force me to this business of killing."

His stance brought him into direct conflict with the American Unitarian Association, from which he resigned in 1918 due to differences over its war policies. He also offered to resign from his church, which the congregation promptly refused. Instead, he remained to establish the nondenominational Community Church of New York into a hub of civil liberties and antiracist activism. He credited his ability to stand almost alone in his pacifism to having met Mahatma Ghandi and embracing his doctrine of nonviolence, which he introduced to the American public.

Rev. Holmes' activities for peace, however, represented but a small part of his dedication to social justice. He was among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with W.E.B. Du Bois; The American Civil Liberties Union, with Roger Baldwin; The League for Industrial Democracy, with Harry Laidler, and the Planned Parenthood Movement, with Margaret Sanger.

Emily Greene Balch was active in many reform movements helping to combat industrial accidents, childhood poverty, and overcrowded and dangerous housing conditions with various inspections and codes. She is, however, best known for her struggles for peace and disarmament for nearly 50 years. In 1946, she became third woman to win the Nobel Peace

Peace, largely for his work with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Civil Rights

Racial Justice and Civil Rights issues have been of concern to the UUA almost since the day it was born in 1961. In 1963, founding president **Dana Greeley** led 1,500 UUs to the March on Washington and established a Commission on Race and Religion at General Assembly. When Dr. Martin Luther King called on religious groups to join the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, 177 UU ministers, reportedly more than all other denominations put together, and hundreds of UU laypeople responded. On the night of the March 9, UU minister **James Reeb** was clubbed to death by a group of white men. On the last day of the march, **Viola Liuzzo**, a UU from Detroit, was shot as she drove along Highway 80 on her way to Montgomery to pick up marchers. It is said that the martyrdom of Reed and Liuzzo contributed significantly to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. For a compelling account of how that act represented a turning point for Unitarian Universalism I highly recommend Mark Morrison-Reed's book called *The Selma Awakening*, which is available on Amazon.

Whitney Young, Jr., was a prominent civil rights leader and executive director of the National Urban League. Young's moderation reflected a long integrationist history that was supported by most African Americans and he played an important mediating role by advocating the civil rights agenda with political leaders and corporate heads. In 1968, he was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. Civilian order. He came to Unitarianism later in life, which was seen as an act of racial disloyalty by many in the

black community. He briefly returned to his African Methodist Episcopal congregation but found he was drawn back to Unitarianism wherever he went. Young often preached in his Atlanta UU church and eventually served on the board of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

Humanitarians

Some of America's great humanitarians were UUs, including **Clara Barton**, the Civil War "Angel of the Battlefield." During the war years, she organized field hospitals and tended to the sick, wounded, and dying on the front lines. When the Franco-Prussian war broke in 1870 while she was visiting Europe, Clara went on to assist on more battlefields. There she first saw the work of the Red Cross and became determined to found an American branch. She worked hard to see it come to pass in 1881. Barton served as its first president for 23 years, during which the organization became directly involved in peacetime disaster relief, such as the Johnstown Flood. In 1900, she wrote to her Universalist minister in Worcester, Massachusetts: "Surely the love that surpasses fear should be the strongest stimulus to all good endeavor."

In her unique and international role as an advocate for treatment of patients suffering from mental and emotional disorders, Unitarian **Dorothea Dix** was the most visible humanitarian reformer of the 19th century. Through a vigorous program of lobbying state legislatures and the [United States Congress](#), she created the first generation of American [mental asylums](#). During the Civil War, she served as Superintendent of Army Nurses.

Universalist minister **Charles Spear** spent most of his career in prison reform. Influenced by the writings of **Benjamin Rush**, Spear became especially concerned about prison conditions, the reform of prisoners, and their lives after discharge. In 1845 he began to edit *Hangman*, a periodical that opposed capital punishment. Charles spoke to many state legislatures to implement penal reform and become an outspoken opponent of capital punishment. His goal, he said, was to apply the spirit of charity to all outcasts.

Musician **Pete Seeger** has been a effective force in the labor, peace, and the environmental movements for decades. The son of a noted musicologist and a music teacher, Peter dropped out of Harvard in his sophomore year to study the banjo and absorb American Folk Music straight from the roots in communities across the country. While on the road, he met Woody Guthrie and Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, who became strong collaborators. Seeger and Guthrie traveled throughout the United States and Mexico as singer-activists, bolstering labor movements with song as they blended activism and folk music. During the infamous McCarthy hearings, he was branded a Communist and blacklisted. When questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he refused to plead the Fifth Amendment, choosing instead to cite the First Amendment, for which he was sentenced to a year in jail but never served. He was a fixture at civil rights rallies during the '60s and anti-war peace rallies in the 70s. In 1966, he launched a campaign to save the Hudson River, which was rank with raw sewage, toxic chemicals, and oil pollution. His plan was to build a majestic replica of the sloops that sailed the Hudson in the 18th and 19th centuries to bring people to the river,

where they could experience its beauty and be moved to preserve it. It worked.

Up to his death two years ago at age 95, Pete continued to perform and carry his messages to audiences all over the world. The inscription painted on the head of his five-string banjo reads: “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.”

For the past 20 minutes or so, I have introduced you to just a few prominent men and women throughout Unitarian and Universalist history who have shown great courage, often at huge personal risk, on behalf of their visions for a more just and equitable society. These famous people, however, are far outnumbered by the hundreds of thousands of Unitarian Universalists who have spent decades laboring for justice in their own communities. It is a principle way for us to express our faith. The preciousness of life on earth, as opposed to a future life in a far-away paradise, and the inherent worth and dignity of every person with whom we share the planet, emerge as common themes for undertaking social justice work.

Many UUs work professionally in service fields as teachers, health professionals, therapists, social workers, and government workers. Many leaders in secular justice-making organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood, the NAACP, the Sierra Club, and Common Cause are also Unitarian Universalists. Still others work in interfaith coalitions or specifically UU organizations for justice. We here in San Miguel devote our time and money to organizations that help the Mexican people better their lives. Unitarian Universalism is not a large

religious body but we have made, and continue to make, an impact on society far greater than our numbers would suggest.

Our Unitarian Universalist values are directly connected to our social justice work. We do this work because we are Unitarian and believe in the interconnectedness of all creation and oneness of the holy. We are Universalist and we believe in the underlying principle of universal love. We are Unitarian Universalist and we celebrate these beliefs in our First and Seventh Principles, calling us to be aware of how we are in the world and in relationship with others. We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people and respect for the interdependent web of all creation of which we are a part. Our work sustains us personally and congregationally by fostering personal spiritual growth and deepening collective spiritual understanding.

This work is more important now than ever. We not only seek to expand the unjustly denied rights of individuals and communities but we are in a life-and-death battle to maintain past victories. All around us we see the erosion of worker's rights and the destruction of a woman's right to control her body and make her own decisions about birth control and abortion. At least one U.S. Congressman has openly called for the repeal of child labor laws. Our prisons are vastly overcrowded cages of despair with no rehabilitation. Racial injustice multiples every day; more than 40 percent of prison inmates are black, which adds up to more than were enslaved in 1850. Police officers regularly beat and murder unarmed black people with few consequences.

Reverend Meg Riley, Senior minister for the Church of the Larger Fellowship, suggests that the focus for UUs in the 21st century will likely be

on economic justice issues. “As a movement primarily composed of people from middle- and upper middle-class backgrounds,” she says, “the struggle for accountability and clear conscience around economic issues will make confronting the privileges of white skin or heterosexual orientation look like a piece of cake.” The effort by the Occupy Wall Street movement is focused largely around economic justice and worker’s rights. UUA president Peter Morales calls it another opportunity to live our faith and urges us to be of service and let the world see the power of our faith in action.

Let me close with a quote from Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the Children’s Defense Fund. “The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make our nation a better place, just as we make it a safer place. It’s a time for greatness, not for greed. It’s a time for idealism, not ideology. It is a time not just for compassionate words, but compassionate action.”