

Against Illiberalism

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A critique of illiberal trends in liberal institutions, with a focus on neoracist ideology in Unitarian Universalism

What Is Unitarian Universalism?

Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a liberal church formed in 1961 by the combining of centuries-old Unitarianism and Universalism. Unitarianism in particular has a longtime heretical tradition dating back to Michael Servetus who was burned at the stake by John Calvin for renouncing the ideas of the Trinity and original sin. UU does not have a creed but a basic set of ethical principles including freedom of conscience and the use of democratic processes, the belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, and the free and responsible search for truth. (Furrer 2019) (UU Humanist Association 2018)

UU minister Rev. Rick Davis wrote, “In founding our two traditions our Universalist and Unitarian forbears sought to create a religious refuge from the oppressive attitudes and practices engendered by ideological, dogmatic thinking.”

University of Chicago evolutionary biologist and organized religion critic Jerry Coyne wrote, “Of all existing religions that claim to be religions, Unitarian Universalism (UU) seems to be the least dogmatic and therefore the least harmful—and perhaps the most liberal and tolerant.”

While Unitarians and Universalists were historically Christian, modern UU is pluralistic. Its theological sources come from different religious and secular traditions. Its members include Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, Buddhists and pagans. A UU slogan is “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.”

Unlike top-down religions such as Catholicism, UU congregations are independent and self-determining, picking their ministers. Traditionally, the national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), works as a service organization to support congregations. (WSUU 2021) (Wikipedia 2017)

Social justice has long been a central part of UU. UU has been active in the civil rights movement, women’s and LGBT rights, anti-nuclear, anti-war and environmental causes. It was the first major church to perform homosexual unions, the first traditionally white American church to have a black lead the national organization, the current UUA President is a woman, and more ministers are women than men. (UUA 2016) (UUA 2017) (UU World 2011) UU is small and eccentric. Its pluralism including the inclusion of atheists and agnostics, lack of central theology and its increasingly far left politics make it the perfect minority of people, but too fringe and politically narrow for most Americans. (Loehr 2005) (Halsted 2018) (UUA 2018)

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Intolerance and Illiberalism in Unitarian Universalism

As described in chapter two, Unitarian Universalism has long been one of the most liberal and tolerant churches. It has believed in individual paths and personal theological choices, freedom of expression and the democratic process. Unlike top-down religions such as Catholicism, congregations are independent and self-determining.

However, following illiberal trends in other institutions, the national UU leadership has been taken over by radicals who are trying to transform UU into an illiberal, top-town church. It controversially declared UU “a white supremacy culture.” In a church that advertises itself as having no creed, it unilaterally declared an extreme version of critical race theory as a “theological mandate” for all congregations and UUs. (UUA 2018) (Hewitt & de la Fuente 2021) (UUA 2021) (UUA 2017) (UUA 2020)

The worst excesses of “woke culture” you can think of are now found in the national UU: dogmatism, religious-like fanaticism and self-righteousness, racial essentialism, censorship, call out and cancel culture, ideological language and language policing, expectations of ideological and political conformity, public shaming and punishment of perceived heretics.

In his 2021 book *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, John McWhorter cited the current national UU as an exemplar of the new intolerance that can be found in the far left. Elsewhere, he writes, “Unitarianism has been all but taken over in many places by modern antiracist theology, forcing the resignation of various ministers and other figures. The new faith also manifests itself in objections to what its adherents process as dissent.” (McWhorter 2020)

One congregant who left UU wrote, “It’s heart-breaking to see a once liberal, tolerant community become a mirror image of the alt-right.”

Retired UU Minister Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr and author Jim Aikin have written that UU is susceptible to falling for political dogmatism because it has no core theological belief.

Aikin writes, “This way of looking at it goes a long way to explaining why the UUA has been taken over by the toxic anti-racist cult. As I see it (this is me talking now, not McWhorter), woke anti-racism found a ready home in Unitarian-Universalism because UUism isn’t a religion at all. We have the trappings of religion — ministers, hymn-singing, passing the basket, all that good stuff. But there are no core beliefs in UUism. Prior to the merger, Unitarianism had not had any core beliefs for a hundred years. It had drifted into rational humanism, so it was fertile soil in which the bad seed could take root. The nice people running the UUA *wanted* to be a religion; they thought they were a religion already; but something was missing from their experience of religious feeling.” (Aikin 2022) (Loehr 2005)

In a liberal church, some UU leaders have said that liberalism and Western Enlightenment values such as freedom of speech and expression, equality, individualism and the vigorous use of logic and reason are oppressive and uphold “white supremacy.” Using the most extreme neo-racist and racially essentialist interpretations of CRT, they began “centering” and “decentering” and even segregating congregants based on race. Audiences and groups at the annual General Assembly are now racially segregated. (UUA NER 2019) (VUU 2018) (McCardle 2019) (Harper 2021)

In a church without dogma, the national UU now has a dogma. Those who dissent or have different viewpoints are considered heretics, labeled “racist” and “oppressors.”

One congregant wrote, “What drew me to UU is the freedom of thought, the sharing of ideas, the being free to differ and debate while holding each other with respect. What drew me to UU is that it eschews dogma, or at least it used to. I fear that is no longer true. If the only way we, as UUs, are allowed to think about and deal with racism and, by extension, anything else we are concerned with is by following the edicts of CRT, how is that not dogma?”

In a church traditionally of independent thinking and the free exchange of ideas, the national UU has worked to control information and censor. Under the direction of the UUA, UU World magazine removed letters to the editor and has stated it will only publish views that support the new orthodoxy. One longtime minister called UU World “an ideological propaganda organ,” and another called it “Pravda.” UU leaders and ministers under the new orthodoxy have told other ministers and congregants not to read books of which it does not approve, and ministers themselves have said they refuse to read certain books. Dissenting views have been censored and dissenters removed from public forums at the General Assembly. (Walton 2019) (Wells 2019) (5th Principle Project 2020) (Trudeau 2019) (Pine 2019) (Aiken 2019) (Cain 2019) (Aikin 2021)

Former UU World columnist Jeffrey A. Lockwood wrote, “The current direction of the UUA is divisive, accusatory, destructive, and contrary to UU principles. Censorship is fundamentally inimical to our religious traditions and values.”

In its very principles, Unitarian Universalism is premised on the right of conscience and democracy. In 2020, the Unitarian Universalist Association had a ‘UU the Vote’ campaign to promote democracy and get out the vote in the elections across the country. However, the UUA hypocritically works to dismantle the pillars of democracy and create an anti-democracy culture and theology within UU. The UUA and other national UU groups do basic anti-democratic practices that are associated with authoritarian movements and totalitarian regimes. These practices include top-down control of information and censorship, suppression of dissent and debate, punishment and even expulsion of dissenters.

How the Unitarian Universalist Association Works to Dismantle Democracy

Ministers who speak out in dissent have been censored and censured. One was publicly shamed and excommunicated for writing a book critiquing UUA illiberalism and identity politics. Another was fired from the Good Officer program after defending him. (Davis 2020) (Devilhead 2020) (Wells 2019) (Wells 2019) (Pine 2019) (Disaffected Colleagues 2020)

Rev. Cynthia Cain writes, “UUs everywhere, but particularly clergy and particularly on social media, are afraid to speak their truth. Their fear is due to their perception that not only will they be shamed, shouted down, and piled upon metaphorically, but that they may actually lose their standing with our association and consequently their livelihoods. This I know for certain.” (Cain 2019)

"Dogmatism and Fanaticism in UU" by Rev. Mark Gallagher "Standing on the Side of Power", UU minister Rev. Munro Sickafoose "UUs in the Pews, Please Help!" by Rev. Richard Trudeau

"Unitarian Universalist ministers flagellate themselves ..." by University Chicago evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne

"I love you . . . Now Change!" by Rev. Cynthia Cain

The two UU seminaries have become dogmatic, teaching seminary students what to think rather than how to think. A minister who graduated from one of the seminaries said he believes the “CRT is now pounded into the students.” A longtime UU minister wrote, “I think the biggest danger to local congregations is the takeover of seminaries and the credentialing of clergy. Newly minted clergy are overwhelmingly indoctrinated and, if they aren’t, they will have a hard time being accepted as UU clergy.”

Following the new UUA orthodoxy, many newly ordained ministers have worked to stifle dissent in congregations. They often platform only the UUA-approved agenda, and censor, punish and even expel dissenting congregants. Congregants have been publicly called out for questioning the orthodoxy and even recommending the reading of unapproved books. A few ministers have promoted that dissenting congregants should be “re-educated” or asked to leave. One UU leader said that older liberal congregants should change their way of thinking or leave UU. (VUU 2020).

Wrote one congregant: “Many congregations are more afraid of becoming split apart than they are afraid of falling under the distortions formulated by the current UUA Junta. This fear drives many church leaders towards silencing outspoken voices. I have already been seriously, and formally, threatened.”

A newly ordained true believer minister told me that I did not belong in UU for expressing perfectly mainstream Jewish views that fall well within the

parameters of the Unitarian Universalism's Principles. When I relayed what she said to a longtime minister, he replied, "She should re-read UU's Principles." Two Jewish friends quit their UU congregations due to the illiberalism and new UUA orthodoxy. One said he saw antisemitism in the new UUA dogma and was scared to speak his views in UU spaces due to the intolerance to different views.

Is the UUA's Anti-Racism Model Antisemitic?

My mother, a longtime women's rights activist who was instrumental in applying Title IX laws to achieve gender equity in public education in Wisconsin, quit her UU congregation and UU as a whole in 2019. She explained, "UU is no longer UU. It has become like other religions. I don't like how the UUA tries to control what are supposed to be independent congregations, and I don't go for dogma. UU has also become mean."

Despite its sloganeering, the new UUA political paradigm is not about centering minorities but a particular narrow ideology.

If the UUA and new ministers wanted to center minority races, genders, the physically or mentally disabled, they wouldn't enforce ideological conformity. Expectations of ideological political, language and religious conformity are oppressive of minority and marginalized groups. It is also the antithesis of multiculturalism and diversity.

This all is why I think the UUA's and UU World's rhetoric about "Centering the voices of minority groups" is disingenuous and false. It is about centering those who agree with a particular narrow political paradigm. A longtime member at my local UU congregation, "I find it hard to tell new member candidates that ours is a non-doctrinaire faith."

Division and strife

In chapter 7 I wrote that a key criticism of dogmatic critical race theory and the ideas of Kendi and DiAngelo is that they are counterproductive to racial justice progress because they divide rather than unite people in the cause. The current UU leadership's authoritarian, dogmatic, illiberal approach to social justice has caused division and strife in Unitarian Universalist congregations and groups across the country. Congregations have split, longtime congregants have quit UU or cut their pledges. There has been talk of a split in the church and the forming of an alternative to the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA).

One congregant wrote, "The passionate adherents to this framework are sowing division within UU communities and needlessly pushing away people who are natural allies in a struggle every UU supports." Another said that due to the divisiveness, alienation and backlash it has produced amongst UUs, the national UU's heavy-handed methods have set racial justice back in UU and many congregations. (Westside 2021)

This should have been predicted. Illiberalism and religious liberalism are by definition mutually exclusive. Trying to unilaterally impose a creed onto a non-creed church will necessarily cause strife. Even national leaders acknowledged that most UU laity are liberals not radicals. A veteran UU minister once compared trying to get congregants to agree to a single thing to “ herd cats.” (VUU 2018)

That this has caused such strife and division in perhaps the country’s most left-leaning church shows how poorly such methodology will work outside of UU.

How this will all play out in Unitarian Universalism only the future will tell.

Recommend Books for Further Reading.

Used to Be UU: The Systematic Attack on UU Liberalism by Casper & Kiskel

Publisher’s description: “Under the rubric of creating the "beloved community" Unitarian Universalist leadership seeks to move the denomination toward a more ecclesiastical rather than associational governing structure. This involves replacing the Unitarian Universalist belief system founded on the Seven Principles with something leadership calls "liberatory theology" where principled dissent will no longer be welcomed.”

The Gadfly Affair: A 21st Century Heretic’s Excommunication from America’s Most Liberal Religion by Todd Ekloff

Publisher’s description: “Freedom, reason, tolerance. These are the values American Unitarianism was founded upon in the late 18th century: the same Enlightenment principles that had also inspired the nation’s founders. Until recently, it was unthinkable that this liberal religion would be capable of banning books and silencing dissenters. But this is precisely what happened after Unitarian Universalist minister Todd Ekloff wrote his book, ‘The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister.’”

About the Author

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