

News Article: DU350

UNITARIAN SPLINTER GROUP WANTS TO BELIEVE IN GOD

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Disgruntled church members have charged the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), which prides itself on accepting people no matter what their beliefs, of being intolerant of theists, those who believe in God. A new reform group, calling itself the American Unitarian Association (AUA), is hoping to return the UUA from its world of liberal political action and atheistic humanism and relativism back to its theistic roots.

The AUA went public in December 2000 and held its first annual meeting in April 2001 in Virginia. The convention sought to build relationships and conduct AUA business. Their Web site listed the following AUA goals: to work on educational materials, liturgies, and a hymnal; to increase its lay and clergy membership; to add congregations to its fold; to raise funds to expand its work; and to publish a newsletter six times a year. The AUA chose for its motto: "Faith, Freedom, Reason."

AUA cofounder David R. Burton also discussed the opposition the UUA has mounted against the upstart group: "They have reacted badly, however, to the prospect of an independent and theistic Unitarian voice developing. Their commitment to religious tolerance seems to be weaker than some of us might have imagined. They have been working systematically and very aggressively to dissuade people from joining or working with the AUA."

For his part, UUA President John Buehrens labeled the AUA reformers "malicious malcontents." Buehrens also accused them of "identity theft" because AUA uses a name that had been the name of an organization that had merged with the Universalist Church of America to form the UUA in 1961.

The UUA filed a lawsuit against the AUA to stop it from using the AUA name and sent a letter to the AUA regarding the "unlawful use" of the name. The letter alleges that the old AUA was not disbanded but consolidated into the present UUA. It asserts that the AUA name is the exclusive property of the UUA and appears in UUA histories and in wills, deeds, and other legal documents.

Burton responded with a letter (both are on the AUA Web site) saying he was disappointed that the UUA attempted "to intimidate us with threats before making any attempt to discuss any differences." Burton, an attorney, cites case law supporting new use of the AUA name. He argues that no corporation existed with that name for the past 40 years and that the UUA abandoned the name and has done no business under AUA for decades. Burton also offered to enter an agreement that any bequests made to the AUA before 2000 would go to the UUA.

Burton asserts that the UUA needs to be reformed because it has become involved with politics rather than religion and promotes atheistic humanism and directionless relativism. Burton states:

The UUA has evolved into more of a political organization than a religious one.... Unitarianism should be about religion, not politics. We also believe that the Unitarian faith involves an affirmation of God or the divine or a higher power. In contrast, the religion you call Unitarian Universalism presents atheism or witchcraft as perfectly consonant with the tenants of UUISM....(it) has collapsed into a vulgar, simplistic relativism that is virtually devoid of religious substance and offers almost no direction.

"It's rare to hear a UU minister discuss God from the pulpit....It leads to division, because there's such a strong humanist or atheist representation," Burton told Michael Kress of Beliefnet. The AUA differs in that it sees "reason and belief in God as congruent rather than hostile."

UUA members identify themselves as humanists, atheists, agnostics, and free thinkers and with the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Afro-American, and Native American spirituality. About one in four identify themselves as Christian, although not all of these professing Christians are theists.

The “What We Believe” section of the UUA Web site never once mentions “God” or any synonym, such as “supreme being.” UUA members write about how Unitarian Universalists affirm each person, spiritual exploration, freedom, dialogue, and social action; but again, none say anything about God.

Burton and others say the problem is not just that UUA ignores God, but that most of the UUA actually *derides* theism. Burton said in a press release that “many of its congregations devolved into God- and Christian- bashing, making traditional Unitarian and Universalist Christians feel unwelcome in their own denomination.” Burton told the *Chicago Tribune*, “in most UU congregations, if you got up and started talking about Jesus, you’d be run out on a rail....The UUA is extremely intolerant.”

Instead, UUA has embraced atheism and pagan polytheism, which directly contradict theism. Because of this, in an article called “Why the AUA?” Burton noted, “Many Unitarian Universalist clergy today are uncomfortable so much as mentioning God in a Sunday service.”

A Unitarian Universalist Christian interest group hinted at this bias against theism in its Web page, “Who are the UU Christians?”: “One can be both a Unitarian Universalist and a Christian, both thoroughly modern and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” They were reacting to many in UUA who say that one cannot be both modern and Christian. Consequently, many UUA “Christians” are not theists, seldom read the Bible in their churches, and reject such central Christian teachings as theism, atonement, and baptism. They consider themselves Christian because they find it helpful to follow the ethical teachings and practices of Jesus — particularly the liberation of the oppressed, which supports their political activism.

UUA minister Davidson Loehr’s article, “Salvation by Character: How UUs Can Find the Religious Center” asserts that Unitarian Universalists must give up theism in order to attain intellectual integrity. He criticizes the use of “God-language,” especially monotheism. He derides “Western” (Judeo-Christian) religion and promotes Eastern religion as being “a preferable and more advanced level of spiritual aspiration.” Once, he said, God was thought to be a Being. Now Unitarian Universalists see God as a concept, a feeling.

Burton emphasizes that politics has replaced religion in the UUA. The UUA Web site does not mention God but does mention political issues and affirms “the use of the democratic process.” One member outlined what could be considered the UUA’s only creed: “The great issues of our time — world peace; women’s rights; racial justice; homelessness; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights; and protection of the environment.”

A Beliefnet article by Michael Kress quoted UUA minister Davidson Loehr affirming, “The politics is primary, the religion is secondary (or worse). I’ve hardly ever found colleagues who are interested in, or able to carry on any...discussion on religious questions, so I share the frustration of folks who wish there were fewer UU political/social cells, and more UU churches.”

UUA encourages “room to explore and the necessity of creating our own faith.” The resulting wide variety of beliefs and practices has led to the formation of shared interest and affinity groups. The groups are affiliated with the UUA, composed of UUA members, and often designated by the UUA Board of Trustees as “Independent Affiliate Organizations.” Latent conflict always exists because their beliefs are not just supplementary but often contradictory.

Groups affiliated with the UUA include:

- *CUUPS: The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans* was chartered by the UUA in 1987 and now claims 70 chapters, all affiliated with UUA.

Its Web site describes its purpose as, “Explore the beauty of Pagan, Goddess and Earth-centered spiritualities woven together with Unitarian Universalism.” It networks neopagans, promotes paganism at UUA assemblies, develops rituals and “theo-logical” materials for use in

UUA fellowships, and publishes the quarterly magazine *Connections Journal* and the journal *Sacred Cosmos*.

- *UU Psi Symposium* studies metaphysics, holistic healing, and parapsychology.
- *Interweave* promotes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender concerns.
- *Buddhist Fellowship* seeks to increase Buddhism's already "extremely influential force among Unitarians."
- *Christian Fellowship* (UUCF) includes "classical Christians," following the ethical teachings of Jesus; "ecumenical Christians" who seek relationships with other denominations; and "liberation Christians" who seek to liberate the oppressed (i.e., "liberation theology"). None accept basic evangelical teachings. The UUCF Web site notes that they start with social action, then find inspiration for it in Christ.
- *UU Service Committee* is no longer affiliated with the UUA, but it draws financial and other support from it. It is active in family planning, women's rights, children's issues, poverty, human rights, and so on.

The AUA promotes a return to a religious, theistic faith among Unitarian Universalists. Oddly enough, God is hardly mentioned in its seven religious principles. Their principles of reason, tolerance, and so on are still very humanistic, not God-centered.

Nevertheless, observers such as Roger Finke of Penn State University think theism has made a come back in the UUA in the past 20 years. A few years ago, he said, a New York City pastor was booed in UUA churches when he concluded services with a benediction that invoked "God," but today that pastor says he can get away with "God-language."

A resurgence of spirituality and theism in UUA is at the root of its growth to 205,000 (in 1,050 fellowships) from a low of 166,000 in 1980, concludes Alan Gomes of Talbot School of Theology, author of *Unitarian Universalism* (an evangelical critique).

— John Juedes