

ST-8402, Our Theological House: An Introduction to UU Theologies

Spring Semester 2010

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Our Theological House was developed by Rebecca Parker and Lauren Smith.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this course is to introduce the student to distinctive theological perspectives present within primarily 19th and 20th century US American Unitarian Universalist traditions and congregations, and to equip students to begin to think and write theologically in the context of post-modern religious communities and culture. Unitarian Universalism will serve as a case study in post-modern religious community and as a specific location for theological reflection. Especially oriented to students who identify as Unitarian Universalists, participants in this course will be encouraged to form a practice of engaged theological thinking within the context of Unitarian Universalism's particular perspectives, resources, limits, and possibilities. Students who do not identify as Unitarian Universalist will be encouraged to become acquainted with this expression of American progressive post-Christian Protestantism as a site in which theological issues critical to post-modern religious community can be engaged.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants who successfully complete the course will be able to identify distinctly Unitarian Universalist theological perspectives present within 19th and 20th century US American UU traditions and congregations, and to describe features of modernity/post-modernity in these perspectives. They will be able to think critically about the limits and possibilities of these theological perspectives, and to assess their relevance for contemporary Unitarian Universalism. They will be able to engage these theological perspectives in their own theological reflection and writing.

FORMAT AND APPROACH

Each week, students in this online course will read assigned texts and be asked to converse with the texts with a short reflection paper. The student's "Reflection" will be posted online for classmates to read and respond to by posting a "Response" to the original "Reflection." The instructor will also read all the students' Reflections and all the classmates' Responses. She will thread her own perspective into some of the Units and her own responses to the ongoing student discussion – as seems appropriate. At the conclusion of the course, each student will prepare a theological reflection in the form of an academic paper submitted in hard-copy directly to the instructor.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS/REQUIREMENTS

- Read the assigned texts each week.
- Write and post assignments each week.
- Regularly read and respond to one another's reflection papers.
- Prepare a short (five to ten-page) final research paper on a theological topic of the student's choice.
- Communicate concerns, questions, and anticipated periods of absence to the Instructor.
- Report any technical difficulties immediately.
- Inform Instructor whether letter grade or Pass/Fail is needed.

TEXTS

Required: All required readings are posted online.

Recommended:

Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805 – 1900*. (Westminster John Knox Press)

Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900 – 1950*. (Westminster John Knox Press)

Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, & Postmodernity 1950 – 2005*. (Westminster John Knox Press)

Paul Rasor. *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the Twentieth Century*. (Skinner House Books)

~Course Outline~

UNIT 1. The Unitarian Universalist Theological House: Overview and Assessment

Rebecca Parker's "Under Construction" offers an overview of Unitarian Universalist theologies from the 19th century to the present and introduces the traditional categories of systematic theology: theological anthropology, the doctrine of God, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology, and pneumatology. Elaborating a model of "Our Theological House," she also introduces the structure and scope of this course. The readings from Gordon McKeeman and Paul Rasor help to contextualize Unitarian Universalist theologies. McKeeman, reflecting on the mistakes and missed opportunities of the institutional merger of Unitarians and Universalists, argues that our theological house "is in serious need of remedial attention" and articulates core issues that require our attention. Examining the central features of modernity, postmodernity, and those of liberal theology, Paul Rasor discusses the cultural turn from modernity to postmodernity and its implications for liberal theology.

UNIT 2. The Unitarian Universalist Theological House: Context

This week's readings provide further historical context, which will help us to situate, understand, and think critically about the Unitarian Universalist theologies which follow. Robinson gives us a succinct overview of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history in US America through the 1980's. Livingstone's first reading discusses the major themes of the Enlightenment and their influence on religious thought; the second introduces the Romantic movement and its central religious expressions, in particular the work of Coleridge and Schleiermacher. Moore's excerpt identifies trends in post-Darwinian liberal theology, distinguishes two major divisions, evangelical and modernistic, and accents the unique contributions of African and African-American liberal theologians, in particular that of Orishatukeh Faduma. Wilber articulates central assertions of postmodernity and critiques their extreme expressions.

UNIT 3. Foundations: God and Humanity I: The 19th Century: Re-imagining Humanity

Unitarian and Universalist theological views on the nature of being human were formed within the ethos of the Enlightenment, in reaction to Calvinism, and express modernity's focus on the authority of individual conscience, reason, and experience.

The excerpt from Elizabeth Cady Stanton's autobiography illustrates the dismal character of New England Calvinism and shows how welcome the new ideas of liberal religion were. In "Likeness to God" William Ellery Channing, the great spokesperson of Unitarianism during the first half of the nineteenth century, introduced a new vision of the goodness – even divinity – of humanity. In the following readings, Channing develops and applies that vision. Earnestly adopting that vision, Lydia Maria Child, as you'll read,

helped to persuade Channing “to make his controversial public antislavery statement.” Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, a Channing disciple, introduced the German concept of the kindergarten to America – and a distinctly Unitarian pedagogy.

UNIT 4. Foundations: God and Humanity I: The 19th Century: Re-imagining Humanity

While drawing much from Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson was the pre-eminent voice among the Transcendentalists in revolt against first-generation Unitarians. Greatly influenced by Coleridge as well, Emerson exalted the intuitive faculty of the individual. Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller’s essay appeared in an 1843 edition of *The Dial* and in 1844 as the book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. It was the first American feminist manifesto, which, as Madeleine Stern wrote, “helped clear the ground for the first woman’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.” A forerunner of womanist theology, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was the first Unitarian writer to “demonstrate how racism, sexism, and classism are intricately intertwined in American culture. . . [calling] for a spiritual resurrection within people and in their actions as moral beings.” (Melba Joyce Boyd) The capture and trial of escaped slave Anthony Burns was a signal event in the anti-slavery movement, engaging many Transcendentalist activists. Henry David Thoreau’s commentary on this event expresses the social implications of Transcendentalist ideas.

UNIT 5. Foundations: God and Humanity I: The 19th Century: Re-imagining Humanity

Theodore Parker, writes Gary Dorrien, “was the first American to approach theology from a standpoint deeply informed by German theology, philosophy, and historiocritical scholarship. He was the first American to present a nearly full-orbed *liberal* view of Christianity in the nineteenth-century sense of the term; and he is the pivotal figure of the Unitarian tradition, the one from whom its neo-Christian and humanistic traditions both derive.” (Dorrien, 2001: xvii)

Parker’s essay provides a summary of his theology as well as “a philosophical history of a whole generation.” It will give you a sense of how theological questions and commitments shaped one modern Unitarian’s life and work, and will provide a context for you to reflect on your own life’s deepest questions, theological convictions, and formative influences.

UNIT 6. Foundations: God and Humanity II: 20th Century Humanistic Theism/Atheism

Nineteenth-century Unitarian and Universalist theological anthropology was optimistic and essentialist about human nature and uncritically regarded white male experience as normative for all humanity. This unit will begin to explore how these perspectives shifted in the 20th century. The nature of being human came to be understood in new ways as gender, race, culture and class increasingly informed the Unitarian and Universalist theological conversation. Liberal optimism was shaken by the devastations of World War I and II, and liberal theologians began to grapple with the limits of reason, the need for grace, and the vulnerability of human beings as well as our power and responsibility.

This week’s readings illustrate these shifts. In the excerpt from *His Religion and Hers*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a 20th-century Unitarian feminist writing just after World War I, calls for religion to be informed by women’s experience. Religious humanism, with its deep roots in the values of modernity, is carried forward into the 20th century in the Humanist Manifesto; unfettered from “likeness to God,” 20th-century religious humanism affirms humanity’s power and responsibility on its own terms. William R. Jones, a black humanist theologian and Unitarian Universalist minister, probes the ways concepts of God can function to sanction racism and oppression or to resist them. Marilyn Sewell’s introduction to *Cries of the Spirit*, a collection of poetry by women, suggests how poetic language that arises from the body of our lives speaks of the divine. Rebecca Parker reflects on the meanings for religious humanism of the feminist insights

of embodiment, interdependence, and vulnerability. Shirley Ranck argues for a Goddess-feminist theology, a pagan spirituality. Sean Parker Dennison develops Rita Nakashima Brock's notion of interstitial integrity in explicating the transgendered, in-between experience. Nancy Mairs, in her excerpt and in the interview with Susanne Skubik, parses the theological and moral values of embodiment from the perspective of a "troubled body."

UNIT 7. Foundations: God and Humanity II: Process/Relational Humanism and Theism

Rooted in modernity's high regard for reason and science, Unitarian Universalist theologians have approached God through the disciplines of philosophy and the natural sciences. In this unit, we will focus on process theologians who seek reasonable, ethical, and scientifically grounded ways of conceiving of God and humanity.

Charles Hartshorne, a distinguished 20th century American philosopher upon whose work a great deal of process theology is based, identified his theological commitments with Socinianism (a Unitarian perspective dating from the Renaissance) and attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation. In "Beyond Enlightened Self-Interest," he offers a process view of human identity, as well as glimpses of a process God. In "Intellectual Autobiography" Henry Nelson Wieman, a process theologian active in the mid-20th century, traces the influences and development of his thought about God and humanity. In "The Human Predicament," he writes more specifically about his central concept of creative interchange, and Jesus. Unlike Wieman, who also attended a Unitarian congregation, Bernard Loomer became a member of one. Loomer wrote little, but his influence on process theology, as Dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, was great. "S-I-Z-E" is a statement of process values. Contemporary Unitarian Universalist minister Gary Kowalski introduces a process view of God in language that is accessible to general readers. John Jungerman, a Unitarian Universalist lay person and physicist, discusses how God can be re-imagined in process theological terms in light of the theories of post-Newtonian physics.

UNIT 8. The Sheltering Roof: The Search for What Saves Us I: Liberalism and the Problem of Suffering and Evil

This unit and the following three units will focus on Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist perspectives on the problem of evil, the understanding of sin, and the search for what saves us – soteriology. Classic doctrines of the atonement – the idea that humanity was saved by the death of Jesus on the cross – have long been rejected by Unitarians and Universalists. So have ideas that salvation should be identified with an afterlife in heaven and escape from the fires of hell.

Critics of liberal theology say liberals do not take evil seriously enough. Some Unitarian Universalists wonder as well: Is our theology only meaningful for the comfortable? The privileged? Those who do not have to struggle to survive the devastating effects of sin or evil? These questions came to the fore in new ways for some religious liberals in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

William Wallace Fenn, Unitarian minister and Bussey Professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School (1900 – 1932), examines these questions with respect to World War I. Post 9/11, Warren Ross poses these questions to a number of Unitarian Universalist religious leaders in an article for the UU World. Unitarian Universalist minister and author Rosemary Bray McNatt raises questions about Unitarian Universalism's capacity to address racial justice issues unless we can embrace humanity's limitations and need for God. Fredric John Muir, also a Unitarian Universalist minister and author, employs insights from Latin American Liberation Theology in arguing for a saving move toward pluralism and away from the ideology of individualism among Unitarian Universalists.

UNIT 9. The Sheltering Roof: The Search for What Saves Us II: The Universalists: Re-imagining Sin and Salvation

This week we will read excerpts from the 19th century Universalist Hosea Ballou's critique of the doctrine of the atonement. Clarence Skinner's *The Social Implications of Universalism*, written at the beginning of the 20th century, presents an optimistic vision in which both hell and salvation are to be found in human social relations and institutions. Ibrahim Farajaje, professor of cultural studies at Starr King School, draws on connections between Unitarian Universalism and Islam in a sermon preached for a new Unitarian Universalist minister.

UNIT 10. The Sheltering Roof: The Search for What Saves Us III: Resisting Oppression, Restoring the Soul, Healing the World

In an excerpt from *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Unitarian Universalist minister and author Mark Morrison-Reed contrasts the central images of black religion with those of Unitarian Universalism, focused through the class-sensitive lens of H. Richard Niebuhr. Howard Thurman, a theological Universalist and friend of Unitarian Universalism, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, evokes the radical significance of Jesus for the oppressed. Jack Forbes, a Native American scholar and activist with ties to Unitarianism and Buddhism, speaks in a late-20th century voice that critiques the "whiteness" of earlier optimistic views of human nature and progress. Sharon Welch, a Unitarian Universalist ethics professor and Provost of Meadville-Lombard Theological School, articulates the power of love in the work of healing, liberation and justice, drawing on black women's literature as a source for theology. Rebecca Parker illustrates the education of white people into ignorance and denial, exposes the theology of innocence which sanctions it, and offers strategies of remedial education, healing, and engagement. "Educating to Create Just Communities that Counter Oppressions" is a document that guides the work of Starr King School.

UNIT 11. The Sheltering Roof: The Search for What Saves Us IV: Renewing Liberalism: James Luther Adams

"James Luther Adams," writes Gary Dorrien, "was a twentieth-century champion of a liberal tradition that the twentieth century nearly left behind, Unitarian Christianity. Though rather isolated as a Christian theist in the Unitarian (later Unitarian Universalist) denomination, he was the most connected, ecumenical, activist-oriented, and least lonely of its theologians." Referred to widely and fondly as JLA, Adams taught at Meadville Lombard Theological School for twenty years, as well as at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Harvard Divinity School, and Andover Newton Theological School.

In "Taking Time Seriously," Adams traces the development of his understanding of salvation as occurring in time, in history and introduces the themes of socially effective institutions and a critique of liberal religion which recur throughout his writings. In "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith," he offers a critique of and five "essential elements of a genuine and vital religious liberalism." In "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature," Adams works with two ancient Greek views of human nature, the rationalistic Apollonian and the "voluntaristic" Dionysian, to propose a more holistic integration of the two for liberal religion. "The Prophethood of All Believers" calls for a radical laicism, a "church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in light of their faith." "Theological Bases of Social Action" provides an analysis of power in various forms. In "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern," Adams furthers his discussion of historical religion, focusing on the nature and meanings of covenant. "In the Beginning Is the Word" treats a topic of ongoing controversy for Unitarian Universalists, religious language, and "The Church That Is Free" is Adams' classic statement, his understanding of the free church.

UNIT 12. The Embracing Walls I: Church as Redemptive Community

Rebecca Parker writes, “Our distinctive ecclesiology, rooted in the radical reformation, says every member of the church has a say in what the church’s purpose is and why we come together. This places the democratic process and human promise-making at the center of church life.” This week’s readings explore a variety of interpretations of UU ecclesiology, both historical and contemporary.

Thomas Starr King, Universalist, and Unitarian minister in San Francisco, preached that the purpose of the church is “to train and feed the spirit of worship.” James Freeman Clarke invoked the image of “leaven” and “mustard seed” in calling for a church of disciples active in the world. Cynthia Grant Tucker, UU historian, shows how, in the late 19th and early 20th century the Unitarian women ministers of the western frontier enacted an ecclesiology of “church as home” in architectural, congregational, and community programs. The readings from the UUA Commission on Appraisal, Rebecca Parker, and Conrad Wright will introduce you to our distinctive covenantal ecclesiology. Both Thandeka and Jen Harrison lift up the religious experience of small group ministries as a new center of congregational vitality; Thandeka drawing on Schleiermacher, Harrison on UU youth groups.

UNIT 13. The Embracing Walls II: Church as Cathedral of the World

Rebecca Parker writes “Missiology: How do we relate to our religious neighbors? We know there are other religious houses. We are one among many. Our missiology does not call us to convert our neighbors, but to embrace them, learn from them, and support them.” This unit explores several Unitarian Universalist models regarding religious pluralism.

W. Creighton Peden presents William J. Potter’s early fashioning of a “Religion of Humanity.” In his theology of a “religion for one world,” Kenneth Patton proposes that the values of liberal religion – the testing of truth through reason and experience – can create a religion that will embrace the wisdom of the world’s many religious traditions, while freeing them of superstition. He claims all the religious resources of the world belong to liberals – a vision that leads some to react to Patton’s theology as a form of capitalist, colonialist appropriation. Forrest Church offers a different image: Unitarian Universalism as a place that recognizes there is one light refracted through many windows, with implications for religious education and worship. Huston Smith, whose congregational home is the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, CA, exemplifies a life-long practice of openness to all the world’s religions through participation and respectful scholarship.

Unit 14. The Blessings of the Earth and Sky: Affirming the World as Sacred

FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE THIS WEEK.

Rebecca Parker writes: “...[P]neumatology is how we speak about our sense of the elemental forces that permeate all of our lives, as close as breath, as fiery as the sun, as transformative as the waters of the river. . .[O]ur particular perspective on spirit is our emphasis on the immediate presence of the spirit of life in all of life.

“Eschatology is the theology of where we came from and where we’re going.” Unitarian and Universalist theologies reject apocalyptic eschatologies that imagine that history will end in a final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, with this earth being destroyed and “a new heaven and a new earth” being born. We also reject other-worldly eschatologies that locate the ultimate “end” or final purpose of human life after death. The distinctive feature of Unitarian Universalist eschatologies is their emphasis on “realized eschatology” – the conviction that the ultimate end or purpose of life is to be found here and now, in this life, on this earth, or to be realized over time in a progressive evolution towards the establishment of heaven on earth – a heaven of justice, compassion and peace for all beings.

Our pneumatology converges with our eschatology in our affirmation of the world as sacred. The reading this week from the Universalist E.E. Guild shows how mid-19th-century Universalists carefully argued from the Bible that this world is not meant to come to an end – a theological argument directed against apocalyptic theologies popular in the 19th century and even more popular today. Thoreau’s “Walking” reveals both his strong reading of nature and a notion of progress or manifest destiny that some would reject as justifying the advance of European colonialism. Readings from Starr King and Jenkin Lloyd Jones show how liberal religion began to see divinity revealed in the natural world and in the farm. The excerpt from Hartshorne’s “Do Birds Enjoy Singing?” offers a process philosophical view of the sacredness of all life. Carol Hepokoski, Unitarian Universalist minister and former Associate Professor of Liberal Religious Ethics at Meadville Lombard Theological School, points the way ahead for a Unitarian Universalist earth-focused theology.

