

**Our Theological House: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalist Theologies,
SKOL 4005
Rev. Roy Phillips**

Our Theological House was developed by Rebecca Parker and Lauren Smith. Roy Phillips is the instructor. For more information, please call (510) 845-6232 or e-mail Cathleen Young at cyoung@sksm.edu.

Purpose

The purpose of this course is to introduce the student to distinctive theological perspectives present within 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.

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. He will thread his own perspective into some of the Units and his own responses to the ongoing student discussion -- as seems appropriate. Several of his own writings are included in a supplementary section and the students may read these at leisure or as assigned by the instructor. Several taped lectures from Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker will provide a framework for the primary texts in Unitarian Universalist theology that form the bulk of the readings. The pedagogy in this course is to generate a range of views from historical and living persons -- to provide a rich, varied and nourishing learning environment in which the student can flourish theologically and spiritually. 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. In addition to written texts, each theological topic will also be approached through visual images that will be posted online. The images will allow the students to reflect on theological themes as they are expressed in art and architecture.

Syllabus: “Our Theological House” (OTH) — 2005

The syllabus is divided into 14 units. We will cover one unit per week.

Unit 1: The Unitarian Universalist Theological House

Using the metaphor of “Our Theological House,” this unit will introduce the classical topics of systematic theology: anthropology/ gynecology, theology, christology/ soteriology, ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology, and pneumatology. The class will offer an overview of the distinctive theological perspectives present within Unitarian Universalist theologies.

Unit 2: The Unitarian Universalist Theological House: An Architectural Digest

North American Unitarian and Universalist theologies were first formed within modernity. Now North American culture has entered a post-modern era. This unit will review the defining issues and events that mark the rise of modernity and the birth of liberal theologies: crisis of knowledge and certainty in European philosophy, slavery in the Americas, rise of historical criticism applied to sacred texts and traditions, scientific development of evolutionary theory, psychology, and post-Newtonian physics, 20th-century wars, ecological crisis, religious pluralism. What happens to liberal religious meaning and religious community in the postmodern world?

Unit 3: Humanity (Part I): Modernity and Religious Humanism

19th Century Liberal Theological Anthropology: With modernity's turn to the subject, liberal theology focused on human nature. Unitarian and Universalist theological views of human nature emphasized human goodness in contrast to Calvinist notions of total depravity. Channing spoke of human beings as created in the image of God and defined the purpose of religious life as self-culture. Themes that emerge as distinctive in Unitarian and Universalist theologies: the self as relational, responsible, reasonable, self-forming, capable, worthy, divine, ethical, self-reliant. Unitarian and Universalist views of the self led directly to social reform movements for the abolition of slavery, for women's rights, for public education, and for labor and prison reform.

Unit 4: Humanity (Part II): Postmodernity, Particularity, and Identity

20th Century and Contemporary Theological Anthropology/Gynecology: In the 20th century, the reputation of human nature changed. Women, blacks, native Americans, queers, and more, challenged the notion of a universal human nature for which white men were the prototype. The notion that an essential, universal human nature exists became questionable. Early in the 20th century, liberal theologians questioned narrow individualism and advocated for a social understanding of human existence, and an evolutionary rather than essentialized view of human nature. The tragedies of the bloody century, including World Wars I and II, the holocaust, resurgent racism, the creation and use of the atomic bomb, shook the

liberal confidence in human goodness. Liberal theologies contributed to and responded to these shifts.

Unit 5: God (Part I): Known through Reason and Science

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.

Unit 6: God (Part II): Moral Constructions and Deconstructions of God

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, progressive theologians have raised ethical questions connected to images of God. William R. Jones, a black humanist theologian and Unitarian Universalist minister, in his ground-breaking book *Is God a White Racist?*, probes the ways concepts of God can function to sanction racism and oppression or to resist it. Patricia Lynn Reilly demonstrates how feminist theology questions male images for God for their implication in patriarchal social patterns that limit women's lives. Unitarian Universalist minister Dianne Arakawa reflects on her introduction to feminist theology and argues that it will fail unless it also struggles with classism and racism.

Unit 7: God (Part III): Immersed in the Spirit of Life

Many contemporary Unitarian Universalists respond to language about "spirit" rather than God. Those among us who are not atheist or agnostic are often "Unitarians of the third person of the Trinity" — we reject notions of God the Father or God the Son, but we retain a sense that there is something larger than ourselves in which we live and move and have our being — an immanent presence or sacred energy pervading all life.

Reading Week, no session

You may wish to use some of this week to work on your final paper.

Unit 8: The Problem of Evil and the Need for Salvation

This unit will focus on 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.

Unit 9: The Liberal and Liberating Jesus

For Unitarian and Universalist theologians the importance of Jesus does not lie in his death as a sacrifice for human sin. Focusing on the religion of Jesus, rather than the religion about Jesus, Unitarian Universalists revere Jesus as a social prophet, an exemplary teacher of compassion and justice, as a liberator of the oppressed, or as the founder of a new way of being.

Unit 10: The Church Gathered: Theologies of Covenant

This unit will review the distinctive feature of Unitarian and Universalist ecclesiology: an emphasis on the power of covenant. There are many theological doctrines of how “church” comes into being: through shared sacramental practices, through ascription to a common creed, through the divine operations of the Spirit or the redeeming work of Christ, or through apostolic succession and the authority of priests. None of these is at the center of Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology.

Unit 11: Images for the Church in the World

Religious community exists not only for its members, but for the sake of a mission in the world — missiology. This unit will explore images for the Church that reflect Unitarian and Universalist theological perspectives on the mission of the Church in the world.

Unit 12: A House for All the Religions of the World

Student’s Research paper is due in hard copy to the instructor during this week or next.

This unit explores several Unitarian Universalist models regarding religious pluralism. 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, exemplifies a life-long practice of openness to all the world’s religions through participation and respectful scholarship. Smith’s approach to the world’s religions is grounded in the image that there are many experiences of the ‘elephant’ of ultimate reality, but one ultimate reality.

Unit 13: Last Things: The Ends of History and Earth

→ **Student’s Research paper is due in hard copy to the instructor no later than this week.**

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.

Unit 14: Under Construction: Where Do We Go From Here?

The final task of this course is to ask, where does Unitarian Universalist theology go from here? What repairs and remodels are needed? What features of our faith are worthy of historical preservation? Are there people for whom our “theological house” would be a welcome place of shelter, a haven for the spirit, but for whom we are not providing hospitality?

Our Theological House is a theological tradition profoundly engaged in advocating for life-giving religion that counters violence-centered religion. This is a gift of our heritage that has cultural significance that extends beyond the walls of our house alone.

Requirements:

- Read the assigned texts each week.
- Write and post a minimum of nine short (one- to two-page) reflection papers.
- Regularly read and respond to one another's reflection papers and the instructor's occasional presentations.
- Listen to several audio taped lectures.
- Prepare a short (five- to 10-page) final research paper on a theological topic of the student's choice.

Optional resources for students:

- An annotated bibliography of recommended primary and secondary sources for the study of UU theology.
- Biographical summaries of UU theologians.

A listing of hymns from "Singing the Living Tradition" that express the theological perspectives studied each week.

Please note: All required readings for “Our Theological House” are posted online (inside the course itself).

Course Policies

1. Each student will agree to use the materials for themselves only.
2. Each student will agree that the lecture notes are not to be printed out or reproduced in any fashion.

Each student will agree that the username and password will not be given to anybody outside this course, and that giving another person this information is a breach of trust and ethics.

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