

CLASSIC UU QUESTIONS
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Once a year, I reserve a Sunday to step back and to use a fancy high-brow term, take a meta-view of what's going on for us UUs association-wide. Last year, on this assigned time to sit on the proverbial porch and take on the observer's role, we looked at covenant. This year, given that we have had a fair number of visitors lately, I wanted to provide them with an efficient way to think about who we are as a movement.

For those who are new, this is something of an extension to our new member, or visitor, orientation. If you're a more seasoned UU, you might think of this as elevator speech training for talking about us to others. Having had some technological glitches lately, I have come across a few of the FAQ's sections you see on websites, and decided that I would build an educational service off the questions that I have most repeatedly encountered over the years.

The most common questions I get are:

Are you Christians?
Do you believe in God? and/or
What exactly is it that you believe?

These is not only the most frequently asked questions, I/we get, they also might be the most important questions for us to answer well. I will take on these basic theological questions together.

The first thing that needs be said about Unitarian Universalism as a religion is that although many UUs are Christians, we are no longer formally a "Christian" church, we are not explicitly Christian anymore, because we UUs have quite ironically, quite comically, decided not to take a position on religious matters.

I like to let the notion that we are a religion that doesn't have a stand on religious matters linger a bit. Often I follow that by saying something like a "Weird, I know." "Man bites dog, I know." Or a "I know it sounds crazy" followed by "It's different for sure."

Unitarianism and Universalism, now combined and like so many UU families, have a modern but clumsy hyphenated name that binds us together were two movements until the 1960's. Both the first U, Unitarians, and the second U, Universalists, began their life exclusively as liberal Protestant Christian movements in the early 1800s, but have come to embrace other truths that challenged their exclusive relationship with the Christian tradition.

It wasn't one thing that made Unitarians, Universalists, and then eventually Unitarian Universalists, to come together. Nor was it one thing that in modern dating terms made us want to see other religions, to flirt with other truths, it was an accumulation of things.

In general, we have moved from being Christians steeped in the American tradition of individual freedom and personal responsibility, to being people committed to individual freedom and personal responsibility that have Christian roots. That's enough content. To the degree that you are comfortable joining me in this prayer. Let's pray.

May our desire to be right. To be hip, with it, truly modern, accurate. Never, ever lead us to shun the wisdom at the heart of our roots and as it is expressed in our sources, the Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Our next question is one I know that, if you have been a UU for any length of time, you have asked or been asked something like this.

"You seems so cool, so relevant, to think like that? Lots of people do?"

"Why aren't you/we bigger?"

"Why have I never heard of you?"

Why we are not bigger really is our favorite question to ponder. It comes from an inflated ego that if only more people were aware of us, half the world would join us.

There are those who firmly believe that our failure to attract people is little more than our inability, and/or unwillingness, to believe in or offer the lure of the reward of a blissful afterlife, and/or the punishment of afterlife. Essentially that we don't do what religions historically have delivered. And that's true.

We don't offer the security or fear that comes with a more traditional faith. We can't offer the reassurance that participating in our church will solve people's existential problems. By honestly suggesting that we cannot see behind the veil, we neuter our capacity to solve or even appease one of humanities greatest dreams/fears. That is certainly part of the reason we're not bigger. Maybe the biggest part.

I do believe that in not offering fear and or salvation we do limit ourselves largely to a demographic that isn't looking for that, and is likely jaded from hearing something that they don't believe from their church.

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Our target audience is the small but growing slice of humanity that is seeking freedom from religions they don't believe in, but still want to be a part of a church. And, that message tends to be more receptive to people who are generally educated and comfortable than seeking cosmic solace from magical forces or, as Greg Garcia likes to call it, a "ghost Lord." The interesting thing is what is constantly tempting is that now more than ever, there are people who think like we do.

Certainly, part of why we are small is that the freedom we offer at our church is already available now in the secular world. Our values are diffused out in the world pretty broadly. The trouble is those who would, or could, be us are a slice of America and the

However, all that warmth and fuzzyness to draw the circle ever wider doesn't mean we will win the day.

At present our version of Unitarian-Universalism, the uniquely American kind we participate in, is spreading slowly around the world mostly via small pockets of ex-pats who in different cities and countries gather to meet. Sadly, this is miniscule, barely measurable, growth. In an effort to grow it/and us, I served one of those fellowships in Sydney Australia a decade ago. It was a marginal success.

Internationally, we have roughly four or five thousand UUs or, more accurately, just Us (Unitarians, that is) in Canada (fifty thousand), about the same number in the United Kingdom, and only about five hundred in all of Western Europe. The largest collection of Unitarians outside the U.S. are the sixty-five thousand that live in Eastern Europe, the vast, vast majority of them being in the Transylvania region of Romania. Unless you're new to PUC or have been living under one of the very controversial planters that block and/or protect the walkway, a yet-undefined group of us will be visiting them next fall. Likewise, pocketed away in a rural region, are about ten thousand British converted Unitarians in India. Roughly two hundred fifty Unitarians hail from Australia and New Zealand. In the Philippines there is a fairly new community of five hundred to six hundred UUs, and there are small fellowships in Tierra del Fuego, Cuba, South Africa, and China. Most of all the above are Christian Unitarians of British origin.

Listing all of the above may be relevant to the query I/we get about whether we may spread, but the heart of the question is, can our non-faith based faith grow? And the answer is? I don't know. Nobody does. Let me revise the question often asked of me, and ask those who are a bit closer to our perspective future church members, you.

Please close your eyes and ask yourself the following: Can a religion that feels and look Christian, but rather than espousing a specific message of cosmic drama and salvation, focuses on ensuring that individuals freely and intentionally pursue their own spiritual and moral journey, thrive?" Could/would a non-faith faith that advocates for policies and behaviors designed to build a kinder world and unite people across the globe into churches and/or a movement? That's really the question.

What do you think? Can and will that tolerance excite people into loyal groups and communities we call churches in numbers large then we do now?

I think the answer is unclear. If we ever were to win the religious future, we would be the first. Religions have historically calmed doubts and offered cosmic promises with tolerance and compassion rather than ask us to question what we think and compel us to work for justice without reward.

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What makes it possible is that we know that the notions of personal liberty and freedom we cherish travel pretty well. Almost without failure, when freedom of choice is offered and remains unrepressed, religious liberty takes hold. However, those norms have

Our third FAQ is both a practical question and a bit deeper. How many of you are there? Who are you? What kind of people are UUs, or go to your church? Who are we? In a nutshell, painted with a broad-brush, we are—and this is fun to play along with— established, largely white, educated, slightly graying, economically comfortable, politically liberal, 'come-outers.' Come-outers are people who have largely left behind the religious identity of their family of origin.

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One more time for fun. We are established, largely white, educated, slightly graying, economically comfortable, politically liberal, "come-outers."

That is the short of it. Here is the longer version of us taken from a combination of personal observation, long held assumptions, and information taken from a UU power-point presentation derived from the 2008 Pew study of religion.

We are established. Eighty-four percent of us are at least third generation Americans. That's among the highest religious rate in the nation.

We are white. In a country where sixty percent of the US self-identifies as white non-Hispanic, seventy-five percent of UUs do. That's pretty white.

Not surprising to probably anyone who has visited us, African-American, Asian and every other racial group is underrepresented in our ranks. However, this is changing, keeping with the demographic shift in the U.S., we are over time getting little less white. In 1990, ninety percent of UUs identified as being non-Hispanic whites dropped.

Most of this growth in the non-white populations in UU churches comes from growth among Hispanic populations. I hadn't expected that. Our church attendees are following national trends of being more diverse and in a regional shift from the Northeast. To the South and Southwest, sadly, and I believe inexplicably, in these demographic shifts we have lost about half the UUs who identify as African American between 1990 and 2009. I don't know the reason we have added more Hispanic UUs and lost many of our African Americans, but the stats speak for themselves—perhaps it is our progressive immigration work.

We are educated. Our members are thirty-five percent more likely to be college graduates than the national average of other religious institutions in America. If you expand the statistics to post-graduate education, UUs have three times the national average of post grad degrees.

We are graying. In a country where only about a third of the overall US population is over fifty-five, about half of all registered UUs are. In fact, from 1990 to 2008, the population of UU members who are retirees has grown.