



Unitarian Universalism

General Information

Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a faith that emphasizes principles rather than creeds. The seven core principles are: "1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person; 2) justice, equity and compassion in human relations; 3) acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth within congregations; 4) a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; 5) the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within congregations and society at large; 6) the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and; 7) respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which humanity is a part."

Because Unitarian Universalism embraces theological diversity, members identify with and draw inspiration from a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, including, but not limited to: Humanism, Agnosticism, Earth-centered traditions and perspectives, Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Paganism.

Number of members in the United States: 586,000*

Governing Body: Unitarian Universalist congregations are autonomous and self-governing. Local congregations are free to join or abstain from joining the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA). The UUA provides an opportunity for local congregations to pursue common goals and obtain services that they cannot provide for themselves. The UUA is headquartered in Boston, MA. Once a year, the UUA holds an annual conference called a General Assembly, in varying locations throughout the United States.

*Number obtained from the [U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 records](#). The number of UUA members in the United States is [215,598](#).

Official Statements on Animals

Because Unitarian Universalism emphasizes the right and responsibility of each member to "search for truth and meaning," and because each congregation is autonomous, there is no central spiritual or administrative body with the authority to issue binding UU proclamations. Nevertheless, over 1,000 congregations have voluntarily united under the umbrella of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA), which frequently issues nonbinding Statements of Conscience.

Among these statements are several on animals. In recent years, for instance, the UUA has

declared that its core principles reveal a moral imperative to decrease consumption levels in order to protect the habitats of endangered species and "the resource base that sustains life on earth."

"Material comforts that we enjoy in the United States and Canada come at a greater cost than we often realize. Our two countries, together with other industrial nations, consume a disproportionately large share of the natural resource base that sustains life on earth. While the United States and Canada alone account for only 6 percent of the world's population, we consume over 40 percent of the world's resources.

"The hidden cost of irresponsible consumption is often far removed from the point of purchase or use.... The ultimate cost includes the price we pay up-front and the hidden price paid by present and future generations when our actions increase human suffering and lead to the extinction of species, degradation of the environment, and depletion of natural resources...We have a responsibility to the earth and all of its creatures. We need to raise to consciousness the moral imperative of responsible consumption habits at home, at work, and in our religious communities...Becoming responsible consumers means putting into action our religious Principles of the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *Responsible Consumption is Our Moral Imperative*.
<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/14003.shtml>

UU principles also call upon members to protect animal habitats by halting practices that lead to global warming and by supporting legislation that keeps wild lands free from ecologically destructive human practices.

"Earth is our home. We are part of this world and its destiny is our own. Life on this planet will be gravely affected unless we embrace new practices, ethics, and values to guide our lives on a warming planet.... We declare by this Statement of Conscience that we will not acquiesce to the ongoing degradation and destruction of life that human actions are leaving to our children and grandchildren. We as Unitarian Universalists are called to join with others to halt practices that fuel global warming/climate change, to instigate sustainable alternatives, and to mitigate the impending effects of global warming/climate change with just and ethical responses...Climatic changes, combined with habitat destruction and pollution, are causing loss of species, forests, human settlements, glaciers, and coastal heritage sites. All living organisms depend on ecosystems that can be sustained only in relatively narrow temperature ranges."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change*.
<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/8061.shtml>

"BECAUSE Unitarian Universalists respect the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part; and

BECAUSE the Unitarian Universalist Association is holding its 2009 General Assembly in Utah, home to the largest intact and most pristine wild land region in the lower 48 states; and

WHEREAS these wild lands provide home to endangered or sensitive wildlife, including desert bighorn sheep, cougar, and endangered desert tortoise, and habitat for elk, deer, bear, and many other animals;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 2009 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association urges congregations and their members to:

call for passage of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (S 799/HR 1925), or other legislation, to protect Utah's spectacular and irreplaceable wild lands ...

call for the Department of the Interior, through the BLM, to establish administrative protections for Utah's wild lands from off-road vehicle abuse, road development, oil, gas, oil shale, and tar sands development ."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *In Support of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act*
<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/144456.shtml>

Currently, the UUA is undergoing a 4-year, multi-congregational discussion concerning the implications of UU principles for eating practices. Entitled, "Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice," the discussion will conclude in 2012 with a UUA Statement of Conscience. A study guide designed to help congregations participate in the discussion reminds members that animals are "emotional beings" with "evolved capacities for...pleasure and suffering" that we should take into consideration when making food choices.

"Zoologists, biologists, and cognitive ethologists all now agree that animals are emotional beings, and that like us, they evolved capacities for satisfaction and frustration, pleasure and suffering as biological necessities. Though animals are often considered part of 'the environment,' the complexity of their experiences suggests that they are much more than animated gardenias or slabs of granite. Animals are not so much a part of environment as they are subjects moving through the environment, with experiences all their own. As anyone who has gotten to know a dog, cat, bird, pig, or cow can tell you, animals are experiencing, sentient creatures with wants, needs, and frustrations."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *Congregational Study/Action Issue: Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice 2008-2012*, pg 47.
<http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/studyguide.pdf>

"What if we tried to take our seventh principle to heart... to respect the interdependent web of existence as it relates to our food choices? How do we balance our habits and tastes with our ethical sensibilities?"

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, "Principle in Mind, Fork in Hand: Ethical Eating."
<http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2009/ga2009/144273.shtml>

"'Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice' is personal in nature (involving our free choices of what we put in our own bodies) and global in reach (with implications for ecosystems, human hunger, social inequity, animal welfare, and climate change)... The point ...is not to propose a dietary code or insist on adherence to a particular set of rituals or religious beliefs. It aims instead to help you feel confident in making easy, tasty, nutritious food choices that fit with your individual ethical and spiritual values."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *Congregational Study/Action Issue: Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice 2008-2012*, pg. 2.
<http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/studyguide.pdf>

Historical References on Animals

In 1961, the Unitarian and the Universalist traditions came together to form Unitarian

Universalism. Prior to their merger, both traditions attracted and inspired members who were passionately committed to animal- and environmental-protection. Among these members were Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*), who wrote in her diary that "animal food" leads to war and nightmares while a "vegetable diet" leads to "sweet repose;" Henry David Thoreau (author of *Walden*), who wrote that the "destiny of the human race" is to "leave off eating animals;" and Henry Bergh (founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA]), who insisted that "mercy" to animals awakens the human conscience and leads to greater mercy for our fellow humans.

“Vegetable diet and sweet repose. Animal food and nightmare. Pluck your body from the orchard; do not snatch it from the shambles. Without flesh diet there could be no bloodshedding war.”

--from Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women: Letters from the House of Alcott*, ed. Jessie Bonstelle and Marian deForest (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1914), 184.

"No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does.

"Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a miserable way - as anyone who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn - and he will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet.

Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilised."

--from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: or Life in the Woods* (London: JM Dent & Sons, Ltd and New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1908), 187, 190.

"That this vast portion of animated nature [animals] could suffer and enjoy seems to have been ignored--not designedly, it is true, but for want of a moral shower...to irrigate and vivify the seed which lay buried in the heart. That great need has been supplied by this Society [the ASPCA], which daily lays bare the wounds which deliberate or thoughtless cruelty inflicts on these uncomplaining friends of ours. Nor does its mission end with this, but through the admonitions of awakened conscience, a more exalted humanity inures to the profit of the superior race, for most assuredly mercy to animals means mercy to mankind."

--from The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, "Extracts from Address of Henry Bergh," *Our Dumb Animals*, Vol 5, No. 1, June 1872, p 206.

Contemporary References on Animals

Unitarian Universalism's lack of religious creeds, its acceptance of multiple spiritual paths, and its encouragement of personal spiritual journeys has inspired members to look for wisdom concerning animals in a wide range of secular and religious sources. The UUA's current president credits both Christian and Buddhist teachings for his realization that how we treat animals "is a spiritual and religious issue."

"Spiritual growth is perhaps best described as developing our sense of compassion and our awareness of the connections which unite us to one another and to the universe. Our capacity to love and our capacity to act ethically are founded on our compassion-literally the capacity to

'suffer with.' Compassion leads us to feel the pain of another. This is the great moral teaching of the Christian tradition.

"Our awareness of our connections to one another, to all of life, and to the universe is the other great pillar of spiritual maturity. When we see that the divisions we create are false and lead to suffering, we have reached a higher awareness. We are one with all humanity and with all creation. This spirituality of the awareness of our connections is a great gift of the Buddhist tradition.

"The realization that how we treat animals is an ethical issue grows out of this spirituality of compassion and awareness of connection. There is no reason compassion should stop at human beings. Our sense of connection must go beyond the human as well. Of course we should be concerned with the treatment of animals. This is a spiritual and religious issue."

--from Unitarian Universalists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, "Thoughts about UUs and the Ethical Treatment of Animals: Peter Morales, Candidate for UU President."

<http://www25.uua.org/ufeta/moralesstatement.html>

A past president of UU's Meadville Lombard Theological School credits "cultural developments ...recent discoveries in the natural and human sciences and...religious naturalism" for his spiritual conviction that we are "related to every living creature, both plant and animal."

"A new humanism is emerging among Unitarian Universalists, a religious humanism informed by cultural developments and recent discoveries in the natural and human sciences and grounded in the larger context of religious naturalism, a religious humanism that offers depth, meaning, and purpose without sacrificing intellectual honesty or the spiritual dimension.... I believe a viable religion of the twenty-first century must include ... the affirmation that human beings are an integral part of nature. We are not separate and distinct from the rest of the natural world; we are part and parcel of it. We are related to every living creature, both plant and animal. The elements of which we are composed—carbon, calcium, iron—are the same elements of which the rest of the universe is made.... We are not dominant over nature, as we once believed; we are its stewards and trustees. A religion of the future will affirm humankind's responsibility to preserve and sustain the natural world. The future of life on this planet and indeed of the planet itself depends on it."

--from William R. Murry, "Reason and Reverence," *UU World*, Winter 2006, reproduced at

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/6558.shtml>

The current chair of the UUA's Ethical Eating task force points out that both evolutionary theory and creationism recognize that all life comes "from the same source" and that all creatures, therefore, are "kin--that is to say, family."

"To believe that humans have stewardship over other animals is to believe that we have special responsibilities to ensure their well-being—responsibilities that come with the role of steward. To believe in creationism or evolution is to believe that animals and humans come from the same source and are literally kin—that is to say, family."

--from The Rev. John Gibb Millspaugh, letter, reproduced at *All Creatures: Religious Leaders React to Abuse of Cows at California Meat Packing Company* <http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/ar-ReligiousReaction.html>

Regardless of where Unitarian Universalists find spiritual inspiration, they recognize that humans often fail to put religious insights into practice. This failure, they say, is partly the

result of societal structures, which hide the abuses that take place in "factory farming, animal testing, sport shooting, fur trade, animal fights, and rodeos." In order to be true to UU principles, members must open their eyes to the hidden suffering around them and recognize that seemingly personal choices--such as shopping and eating habits--profoundly impact animals and other forms of life on Earth.

"The simple act of eating expresses one of our most basic and profound relationships with Earth and life. For some of us, our main connection to non-human animals is through our forks and knives. Often, we know very little about them. The freezer pack wrapped in cellophane bears little resemblance to a creature that sees and breathes and sighs. Their bodies become our bodies, yet their lives remain hidden from view."

--from Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, *Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice 2008-2012, Resource Guide*, pg 47. <http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/studyguide.pdf>

"The big picture on animal issues today is fraught with contradictions. On one hand, we see manifestations of love and appreciation for animals. Two-thirds of American households have pets, and these households buy products and services totaling \$44 billion. Some 71 million Americans 'appreciate' wildlife, in the form of activities like whale watching or seeking information on wild animals. There are statutes prohibiting cruelty to animals in every state. Yet there is also routine exploitation of animals in the United States... Abuses can be found in factory farming, animal testing, sport shooting, fur trade, animal fights, and rodeos."

--from UUA, "Principle in Mind, Fork in Hand: Ethical Eating"

<http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2009/ga2009/144273.shtml>

"Scientific writings and popular media link our food production and distribution systems to climate change and the energy crisis, and uncover deep-seated problems with our agricultural infrastructure. As a result, many Unitarian Universalists are coming to perceive intricate connections between environmental concerns, economic justice, social justice, and food... Ordinary people—not just environmentalists or those working for social justice and rights issues, but people who are busy balancing issues of everyday living— are recognizing that the true cost of food is far greater than what we pay at the register. Costs include global warming, pollution, destruction of ecosystems, degradation of the fresh water supply, and degradation of arable land."

--from UUA, *Ethical Eating*, pg 22 <http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/studyguide.pdf>

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