

# The Non-Idiot's In-Complete Guide to Unitarian Universalism

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple; Coffee, Coffee, Coffee (v. 1,2), Lean on Me.

Tenor solo: There Is a Balm in Gilead.

## SERMON

Every now and then in my office I make the mistake of answering the phone. Oh, let me be clear, it's good luck if it's *you* calling! It's only bad luck if it's someone asking for an answer to the meaning of Unitarian Universalism. They haven't been here yet, but they are curious.

"What do you believe? What are your services like?"

The more I say, the more questions I will get, so I try to keep my answers brief. Then I say: *The best way to get a sense of what it's like and whether you'd feel at home is to visit. You are welcome to visit any time*

Of course, these days, questions like that often come by email. "Hello [one writes]. I've seen your website and it looks great. Can you tell me more about your congregation? What kind of activities do you have? What are your services like?"

Hmm. *Really? You've seen the website? How did you miss the tab that says: "What to expect on Sunday?" or the one that says "Our Beliefs?" Or the tab that says "Explore Our Groups?"* I don't say this, of course.

Instead, I reply: *Thank you for checking us out! Here are some links that may answer your questions. I hope you will feel free to visit sometime. That's the best way to get a sense of this congregation.*

I know that I'm not alone. Many of you get questions about UUism too. That got me

thinking about the best selling series, the Complete Idiot's Guidebooks. In a brief, lively, no-nonsense way, these books introduce everything: physics, philosophy, foreign languages, Tai Chi, natural child birth, green gardening, Medicare, how to play poker, and if that does not work: filing for bankruptcy. Their book about world religions is inviting and inclusive in its tone. There are individual Guides to Islam, Hinduism, Wiccans and ancient Aztecs, but none about Unitarian Universalism. So, this morning, let's begin making our own version.

First a word about the title of the series, *A Complete Idiot's Guide*. They use the word "idiot" to mean someone who does not know much. But in its ancient Greek origin, the word *idiot* meant someone who does not *care to know*. In Athenian democracy, an idiot did not care what was going on around them. It was a person "characterized by self-centeredness, [a person] concerned almost exclusively with private affairs," as opposed to matters of the common good.<sup>1</sup>

There are some religions or philosophies that promote individualism without a call to heal the world or help others or be generous. Some people say: "I'll work on my own spiritual growth and you work on yours, and the world will take care of itself." As Unitarian Universalists, we can't say that. We affirm that making things better takes intention and effort, and working together.

Our religious ancestors fought for political changes: ending slavery and segregation, extending to women the right to vote and own property, establishing public education throughout the country, defending free speech and freedom of religion, and

expanding the circle of equality to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.

We are a religion of *this* world, made of people and congregations that care about the common good. We believe we are connected to other people and mutually dependent with other beings on this earth. That is the opposite of the ancient meaning of an idiot.

In the Athenian sense, a complete idiot would not be curious enough to read a guidebook. So, leaving that word aside, let's imagine there would be an audience for our book. What should it look like?

First off, I don't think a bound volume would cut it. We have a *living* tradition. We say that the revelation of truth is continuous and ongoing. Religious truth is not sealed once and for all in a hierarchy or in a book of scriptures. By the same token, an explanation of who we are will always be an *in*-complete guide. So, let's make our guidebook in the form of a loose-leaf binder. We can add new pages and update old ones.

There's a lot of diversity within our faith, not only in each congregation, but across the world. In the Hungarian-speaking communities of Transylvania, Unitarian Churches have been around since the late 1500s. In the remote hills of northeastern India, the Khasi Unitarians have been worshipping since 1888.

And in the past few decades and even recent years, new groups of UUs have sprung up in the Philippines, Singapore, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Unitarian Universalism looks different in each culture. With a loose leaf binder, each church could remove the pages that don't describe them accurately. We could do the same across this country; open the binder, and insert your own expression of our liberal faith. Imagine how the *Non-Idiot's In-Complete Guide to UUism* could have off-the-charts sales.

So let's get started. What important themes would we want in our binder? I propose to you the first few chapters.

*Chapter One:*

*We're All in This Together – and Separately*

We are a congregation-based movement, but every church is independent. Every congregation has its own constitution and bylaws. Each one can have its own mission statement and covenant. A congregation is even free to wander aimlessly without a mission or a covenant. I'm glad that we have both statements in this congregation.

More than 1,000 congregations in total, all of our UU societies, churches and fellowships freely join together as an association, the [UUA](#). In this association, nobody can tell our church what to do, but at the same time we can't rely on a hierarchy to give us easy answers. The Unitarian Universalist Association will not pay for our mistakes, or pay for anything that we do in Sacramento, for that matter.

It's up to us. Indeed, every congregation pays dues to the denomination to support its work. We support staff and leaders at our Boston headquarters and in five regions of the country. Our support makes it possible for leaders of the denomination to speak out on issues of justice, freedom and fairness in the larger world. From the UUA we get staff compensation guidelines and expert advice about congregational life, leadership workshops, religious education materials, and lots of books for our bookstore here in the library.

Every congregation has the right to send voting delegates to a yearly [General Assembly](#). At that assembly, delegates make some key decisions of our association: voting on resolutions about social concerns and business matters, and electing a new president and moderator and board of trustees for the association. These assemblies are what gave us

the statement of our [UU Principles](#). This brings us to the next chapter.

*Chapter Two:*

*Pillars of the Faith—  
Always Under Construction*

We have no formal creed. There is no statement of belief which a person has to agree to in order to belong to a church. Yet in joining together, congregations have articulated the values we share in common. Our Seven Principles do that. It may be helpful to think of the seven principles as pillars. They are the building stones which give shape to our UU movement.

Number 1 and Number 7 are the foundation stones. Number 1: we affirm the inherent worth of every person; we promote human dignity. This means that no ideology is more valuable than a person is. No belief system is more important than an individual human being. And in Number 7, we affirm that we belong to something larger than ourselves. We live in a web of relationships. Everyone and everything that lives is inter-connected and mutually dependent on everything else. We belong to one another, and to nature, creation, the cosmos, the web, the divine embrace. We are interdependent, and this means we have responsibilities.

[On these two pillars stand our other five principles](#), and these have to do with shared responsibilities. You might call them our principles of practice. These include using the democratic process, and promoting the right of conscience for everyone. They include encouraging spiritual growth in one another and pursuing our own growth in a free and responsible search. Our pillars of practice also include showing compassion, working for justice and fairness and freedom for everyone.

The stone arch of our Seven Principles is weighty and strong, yet it's always under construction. The wording may change over

time, reflecting fresh insights and more inclusive language. And there's nothing mystical about having exactly seven of them. From time to time a stone gets carved anew. An example is the crafting of the seventh principle (interdependent web of existence). By voting to adopt that one, our General Assemblies adopted the image of the web as a religious term for our tradition.

*Chapter Three:*

*What about God?*

Many will ask this question. "Every faith believes in a supreme being, right?" This is one big distinction about us: we have agnostics and atheists among us, and they are open about it. We have theists, too. Some theists appreciate the traditional understandings and language about God, but others imagine the divine in a broad way.

Here, we strive to welcome diversity of belief out in the open, using respect and curiosity to enrich our time together.

A UU church is like an extended family sitting around a Thanksgiving dinner table. (But not a dysfunctional family.) Some of the cousins are monotheists, others are non-theists, and a handful are poly-theists.

We are spiritually hungry, and we choose from several offerings: a serving of wisdom from books and the arts, a helping of insight from science, and the seasoning of personal experience and reason. We have prayers, candles and flowers from the Pagans to make it a celebration. The Buddha is humble enough to serve the food, showing compassion for all beings. The ancient Jewish prophets are at the table, reminding us that people are going hungry outside our walls. And Jesus of Nazareth is there too, making room and inviting strangers to sit together.

And, perhaps most important at this table is this: no matter the sources of the spiritual gifts we might be sharing and enjoying, all spiritual sources remind us to show gratitude for the gifts of life and for all our blessings.

*Chapter Four:*

*So, Are You Christian or Not?*

That depends on which one of us you ask. Some are, some are not. It also depends on what you mean by the word *Christian*. The roots of our UU tradition are embedded in Christianity. In the middle 1500s in Central Europe, not long after the Protestant Reformation had begun, radical Christians were arguing about the nature of Jesus: was he God or was he the son of God? The early Unitarians of Italy, Poland and Transylvania said: We think Jesus was a man, and one who was a prophet of God.

In the late 1700s, in Massachusetts, Unitarian Christians considered Jesus to be the model human being. His life and words can show us what greatness is possible in the human character. In that same colonial time, and also in New England, early Universalists rejected the unhappy Christian idea of eternal torture in hell. To them, God was not a cruel tyrant but a loving creator and an embracing parent. God never stops loving and forgiving. God wants us to be joyful, brave, generous and loving.

Even as many UUs don't identify as Christian these days, and even as many non-Christians are drawn to our communities, that is our heritage.

These values of dignity and love persist. With open hearts, together we strive to listen for those values in many traditions, faiths and cultures.

*Chapter 5:*

*Why Such a Long Name?*

After a century of spreading those radical values of dignity and love, the Unitarians and the Universalists came to see how similar their two denominations had become. Indeed, in the 1860s, California minister [Thomas Starr King](#) said the Universalists and Unitarians were "too near of kin to be married."

They did eventually get married, but not without a lot of conversations. There was a broken engagement or two, and then cohabitation--or at least cooperation--in religious education programs, continental youth organizations, and a shared hymnal. But the legal marriage took place in 1961, giving us the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and giving us one of the longest names of any religion.

*Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9*

These are yet to be written, and maybe I'll do another sermon later on to add to this one. But as members and friends of a free faith, you should do your part in fleshing them out. Plenty of topics are begging for a page in this Guidebook. What does not work for one of you may serve another quite well.

Each one of us is on our own free search for meaning and purpose. We share what's on our pages with one another. We speak our truths, and we listen to one another. I look to see what inspires you, because I might find it helpful to me, or to another person. Our individual pages, once collected and appreciated, can provide wisdom, courage and hope. So may it be.

Blessed be, Amen, and Namaste.

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<sup>i</sup> "Idiot," in *Wikipedia*, accessed May 20, 2016.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiot>