



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST WORSHIP

BACKGROUND

Unitarian Universalist worship seeks to strike a balance between four sources of religious authority: tradition, scripture, reason, and direct experience.

In 16th century Europe, Protestants challenged the Catholic emphasis on sacramental traditions by making scripture the primary source of authority in worship. In succeeding centuries, reason became more prominent with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Finally, the Romantic Movement elevated direct, personal experience to its rightful place in a hierarchy of religious authority.

The earliest American Unitarians combined the Protestant emphasis on scripture with the Enlightenment emphasis on reason into a focus on the critical interpretation of scripture. Transcendentalism added direct personal experience to the mix.

Early Universalism, by contrast, was more evangelical in style, combining a focus on scripture with direct, personal experience, and less emphasis on reason.

When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America consolidated in 1961, these various strands came together.

Today, the varieties of Unitarian Universalist worship and attendant theological perspectives, reflect different ways of combining and emphasizing these four sources of religious authority. The “celebration of life” is an oft-quoted definition of worship in Unitarian Universalist congregations. The phrase suggests that an act of worship expresses feeling more than it adores a deity (although, for some, it may do both).

Worship is approached as a human activity which ascribes worth to some value, idea, object, person, experience, or attitude and helps us find the power to reaffirm, in word and deed, what is worthy of our ultimate commitment.

It provides a vehicle for focusing the religious emotions of members of the religious community, for clarifying their ideas, and for reinforcing their religious sentiments.

In worship, the meaning of life, death, and the universe crystallizes out through prayer, meditation, and other devotional activities.

The result is that people may go forth strengthened and uplifted, better able to grapple with their personal problems, more capable of contributing to the establishment of peace and justice in the world.

When Unitarian Universalists worship, we are shaping, formulating, organizing, and ordering our faith. We are actively, individually and collectively, also allowing our lives to be shaped by our faith. In this sense we are engaged in a celebration of life.