



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Universalism, Then & Now:  
Lessons from the Life of Orestes Brownson,  
“An American Religious Weathervane”**

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This spring, my colleague The Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman and I have been invited to co-teach “Unitarian Universalist History and Polity” at Wesley Theological Seminary in D.C. We taught this class once before three years ago, and I am grateful for another opportunity to revisit UU History in depth. As UUs, we formally recognize Six Sources:

1. Direct experience
2. Words and deeds of activists for peace and justice
3. Wisdom from the world's religions
4. Jewish and Christian teachings
5. Humanist teachings
6. Earth-centered traditions

But as is mentioned occasionally, we might benefit from **adding a *Seventh Source*: “Our own Unitarian Universalist history and heritage” with its inspiring figures, cautionary tales, and stories of how and why our tradition came to be.**

One major change from the last time I taught this class is that this past spring, Skinner House Books (the UUA’s imprint for books about Unitarian Universalism) **published the first comprehensive collection of primary sources from Unitarian Universalist history:**

1. *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism: From the Beginning to 1899*
2. *Volume 2: From 1900 to the Present*

Together the two volumes weigh in at slightly more than 1,100 pages.

I'm toying with the idea of offering a parallel UU history class here at UUCF this spring. There would be no grades or papers. But it would involve a fair amount of reading. If that sounds like your idea of a good time, let me know. (It is my idea of a good time.) But if there isn't a critical mass of people with time and energy around reading lots of UU history, no worries. I understand.

I've preached a fair number of UU history sermons over the past few years, but starting this year, I'm going to experiment with scheduling history topics at two recurring points annually. Yesterday, **September 30th, was the 247th anniversary of John Murray's preaching of the first Universalist sermon in America.** (You will hear more about that occasion as we approach 2020, which will be its 250th anniversary.) And I would like to use that anniversary as a regular occasion to reflect on the *Universalist* half of our heritage. (More in the spring about the annual occasion to focus on the Unitarian half.)

But before going too deeply into Universalism, I would be remiss if I failed to followup on a promise I made a few weeks ago, when our focus was on Islam; we reflected on highlights about Muslims from a new survey released a few weeks ago about "[America's Changing Religious Identity](#)." So it's only fair to also turn the mirror on ourselves.

I will limit myself to six highlights:

1. "Jews, Hindus, and Unitarian Universalists are the **most educated groups in the American religious landscape**. More than one-third of Jews (34%), Hindus (38%), and Unitarian Universalists (43%) hold post-graduate degrees. No religious group has a higher proportion of members with post-graduate degrees than Unitarian Universalists. Nearly two-thirds (65%) have a college education, including more than four in ten (43%) who have an advanced degree."

It's also important to read these statistics in the opposite direction. Although UUs, among U.S. religious groups, may have the single highest percentage of members with post-graduate degrees, **more than half of UUs do *not* have a post-graduate degree.** And more than one-third do *not* have a college degree. **Much more important than degrees is whether someone is open-**

**minded, curious, and interested in lifelong learning.** (There is also a lot of truth in the joke about the extreme end of advanced degrees—that doctoral dissertations are often about knowing “more and more about less and less until you know everything about nothing!”)

2. Unitarian Universalists are also **much older** than members of other religious groups: The median age is 54 years.

This is the same as the median age of “white mainline Protestants”—and slightly younger than the median age of “white evangelical Protestants and white Catholics” (55 years old).

3. The **gender imbalance** is also quite prominent among Unitarian Universalists, among whom nearly **two-thirds (64%) are women**.

It is also important to note that the **Unitarian Universalist Association is “the only denomination in which women represent the majority of ministers.”** Women represent “a third or more in only a handful of other denominations, including Reform Judaism, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church.”

4. Unitarians Universalists are also **fairly well off financially**.

That being said, among UUs, “18% report living in households making less than \$30,000 annually, and 22% report having incomes exceeding \$100,000.”

5. Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists have a **much higher proportion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender** members than other religious traditions. One in seven Unitarian Universalists (14%) and American Buddhists (14%) identify as LGBT.

6. **No religious group is as politically progressive as Unitarian Universalists.** Seven in ten (70%) Unitarian Universalists identify as progressive.

For those interested in studying these statistics more closely, I will link to the full survey about “America’s Changing Religious Identity” in the sermon text that we post each week on our website.

Reflecting on our demographics as a religious movement is appropriate on this Sunday in which we are focusing on the *Universalist* half of our heritage, which contains within it the **challenge to continually widen our compassion and care in ever-expanding circles of inclusion—until we mature into a movement fully worthy of the name *Universalism*.** And

taking the long view, we can see that from the late eighteenth century through today, Universalism has evolved *from* a focus on universal salvation for all in a next world *to* a universal call to “Love the hell out of *this* world.”

To give you two broad strokes of that evolution, I mentioned earlier that John Murray, known as the “Father of American Universalism,” arrived in the North American colonies from England in 1770, six years before the Revolutionary War. His message of universal salvation was life-changing for many people accustomed to threats of damnation from religious leaders. The spirit of Murray’s Universalism was later distilled as “**Give them, not hell, but *hope* and *courage*.** Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but **preach...kindness and everlasting love....**”

And here is another of my favorite stories from the early days of Universalism. Hosea Ballou, the leader of the next generation of Universalists, was once questioned about the ways that Universalism could lead to the moral corruption of society. His interlocutor said:

“Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, “**If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.**”

There’s so much more I would like to tell you about Universalist history more broadly, but for now, I will shift to our focus for today: Orestes Brownson (1803-1876).

Patrick Carey, a theology professor, who has written the best modern biography of Brownson, calls him, with affection, an “**American Religious Weathervane**” because his **theological orientation changed so many times**. More charitably, we might call Brownson a maverick. And in contrast to the many politicians who like to call themselves “mavericks”—but whose behavior is often more *conformist* than independent-minded—Brownson was a maverick to a head-spinning degree:

- During his time as a Unitarian minister, he joined the *rebellious wing* of Transcendentalists.
- But among those Transcendentalist rebels who emphasized *individualism*, he championed a “*social* understanding of the human person.”
- Although he championed working class causes, he did not always support the labor rights

movement on its own terms, believing that “no lasting reform in society could be achieved without the aid of genuine Christianity.”

- And “although he opposed slavery on moral grounds...he rejected immediate emancipation as an unworkable solution and thereby alienated himself from many of the leading abolitionists (95-96)

Brownson pursued a relentless quest for what our UU 4th Principle calls “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” And his pilgrimage included deep (if not always long lasting) immersions into Presbyterianism, Universalism, skepticism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and Catholicism (viii). And while I will confess that I can sometimes be a bit theologically promiscuous (that can actually be a virtue as a UU minister), Brownson takes theological promiscuity to a whole other level. Although his life was a “**restless search for balance between freedom and communion**” (xii), and despite his many shifts in loyalties, he was not merely a dilettante sampling one option after another without any real commitment or thoughtfulness. Instead, Brownson was sincerely hardcore about each of his religious commitments in turn.

And we know a fair amount about him because he wrote—and published—a *lot*. There’s the seven-volume *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, which collects his writings up to 1844; the twenty-volume *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, which contains Brownson's post-Catholic conversion publications; and the five-volume *Orestes Brownson: Works in Political Philosophy*. So for anyone considering a career as a Brownson scholar, think carefully about what you would be getting yourself into with primary sources alone!

His father’s family were Presbyterians, but his father died of pneumonia when Brownson was young (2). His mother’s parents were Universalists. Orestes and his twin sister Daphne were born in 1803, becoming the fourth and fifth children in the family (3). After the death of Brownson’s father, his mother, finding herself at **age twenty-nine with five children under the age of eight**, made the wrenching decision to send three of the children, including Orestes, to three different families to be cared for.

Orestes was about six years old when he was sent 17 miles north to live away from his birth family for more than seven years. One psychological reading of his life is that, “**These**

**youthful experiences of separation created in him a strong sense of personal independence, initiative, and self-reliance, but they also put him in a constant search for the communion, continuity, order, and stability that he did not” experience as a child (4).**

Tracing the turning points in his life can feel a bit like whiplash:

- At age thirteen, he experienced a **conversion** experience during a revival that was part of the Second Great Awakening (6-7).
- Next, from ages fifteen to nineteen, “he experienced a period of **skepticism**, rational critique of all revealed religion, and atheism” (9).
- In 1822 at age nineteen, he briefly became **Presbyterian** for a few intense months (9-11).
- Then, he became a **Universalist** minister for four years (13-15, 29).
- Following that, after a brief flirtation with his previous religious skepticism, he became a **Unitarian** minister (30).
- He later was caught up in the **Transcendentalist** reform movement within Unitarianism, becoming a charter member of the Transcendentalist Club, which included so many of our famous nineteenth-century Unitarian ancestors (56).
- In 1844, at age forty-one, Brownson made his final conversion to what ended up being a quite orthodox and conservative version of Roman **Catholicism** that would dominate the final decades of his life until his death at age seventy-two in 1876 (382).

One sacrifice is that despite how passionate and knowledgeable he was about religion, **since Brownson was married with children, his conversion meant that he could not serve as a member of the clergy within Catholicism (155).** Nevertheless, Brownson maintained the zeal of a convert, and did not hold back in criticizing his former colleagues—just as he had criticized Catholicism (and other perspectives) during his sojourn within various versions of Protestantism.

Of course, some of his former colleagues returned the favor. In the book-length poem *A Fable for Critics* (1848), the Unitarian and poet James Russell Lowell included a stanza explicitly skewering Brownson:

**He shifts quite about, then proceeds to expound  
That 'tis merely the earth, not himself, that turns round,  
And wishes it clearly impressed on your mind**

**That the weather[vane] rules and not follows the wind;**

Proving first, then as deftly confuting each side,

With no doctrine pleased that's not somewhere denied,

He lays the denier away on the shelf,

And then — down beside him lies gravely himself....

The worst of it is, that his logic's so strong,

That of two sides he commonly chooses the wrong;

**If there is only one, why, he'll split it in two,**

**And first pummel this half, then that, black and blue.**

That white's white needs no proof, but it takes a deep fellow

To prove it jet-black, and that jet-black is yellow.

**He offers the true faith to drink in a sieve, —**

**When it reaches your lips there's naught left to believe....** (xiii-xiv)

In a similar vein, the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke delivered a famous prose critique of Brownson:

**No one has ever equalled Mr. Brownson in the ability with which he has [over time] refuted his own arguments.** He has made the most elaborate and plausible plea for eclecticism, and [later] the most elaborate and plausible plea against it. He has said the best things for transcendentalism, and the best things against it.... He has satisfactorily shown the truth of socialism, and its necessity in order to bring about a golden age, and he has, by the most convincing arguments, demonstrated that the whole system is from the pit, and can lead to nothing but anarchy and ruin. (xiv-xv).

There is much more to say about Brownson, but given the outline we have explored of his major turning points, what lessons might there be for us today from the life and writings of this UU ancestor who was in turn a Universalist, a Unitarian, and so much else, both before and after?

In reflecting on Brownson, the first quote that always comes to my mind is from Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance": "**A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.**" Brownson was willing to risk "what he himself called a '**glorious inconsistency**' that

**exhibited the mind’s flexibility and its openness to grow”** in light of new information and insights (xv). And his commitment in his final years to Roman Catholicism is a reminder that there are those who journey within Unitarian Universalism for a significant season of their lives—sometimes making important contributions to our movement—but who may not always be able to remain even within our big tent.

Brownson ultimately passed through Universalism—with its challenge to include ever-more beings within our circles of care and compassion—into a more narrow sectarianism. But for those of us who do remain within the big tent of Unitarian Universalism, the challenge of our Universalist heritage is to continually lean into what that word *Universalism* can mean at its best. In the words of the General Superintendent of the Universalists at the 1943 annual General Assembly:

Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For, **so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome:** theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and color-less. **A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable** (Howe 109).

In that spirit, may we each do our part, within our sphere of influence, to help build a religious movement that is evolutionary, planetary, and universal.