

Unitarian Universalist Spirituality: History and Practice (I370)

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Meadville Lombard Theological School @ Ferry Beach

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Contemporary Unitarian Universalists seek greater depth in their spiritual lives, as well as a set of disciplines that can sustain that depth. They crave not only a language of reverence, as President William Sinkford has noted, but a *practice* of reverence. To satisfy their search, many UUs have turned to the practices and disciplines of other religious traditions, while remaining unaware of the spiritual riches of their own.

In this one-week intensive course we will explore the history and practice of UU spirituality by examining the lives and writing of such 19th century figures as William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Ware, Jr, Caroline Healey Dall, Fannie Barrier Williams and others. We will study both the Unitarian spiritual theology of “self culture” that permeated their lives, as well as the practices that sustained their spirituality, including meditative self-reflection, prayer, journaling, devotional reading, encounter with nature, and small-group practices. Finally, we will explore whether and how this tradition and these practices can be reclaimed to enrich the spiritual lives of contemporary Unitarian Universalists.

COURSE COMPONENTS AND GOALS

The course will weave together several components in order to achieve three distinct goals:

1. Historical study of Unitarian spirituality through primary and secondary texts, with the goal of providing students with a better understanding of Unitarian Universalism’s rich tradition of spiritual exploration.
2. Experiential practice of the spiritual disciplines of Unitarianism, with the goal of providing students with the opportunity to use these practices in their own lives.
3. Methods/tools for teaching this tradition and these practices, with the goal that students can then share them in the local congregation.

INSTRUCTOR

Robert Hardies is senior minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, DC. He has taught Unitarian Universalist history at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, and is completing a doctoral project on the spiritual practices of 19th century Unitarians and Transcendentalists.

READING LIST

The reading list consists of three books, a lengthy reader and one spiritual biography/autobiography. Of the three books, Ware's *On the Formation of the Christian Character* is the classic devotional manual for the period of Unitarianism that we will be studying. Both Hambrick Stowe's *Practice of Piety* and Schmidt's *Restless Souls* provide important theological and historical context by describing, respectively, New England spirituality before and after the period we will be studying. The reader consists of both primary documents (sermons, addresses, diaries, devotional aids, etc.) as well as secondary material.

All reading MUST be completed before the start of the class.

1. Books

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1982.

Read chapters 1 through 6.

New and used copies available on Amazon.com.

Henry Ware, Jr., *On the Formation of the Christian Character: Addressed to Those Who are Seeking to Lead a Religious Life*. Boston: James Munroe, 1856.

Read all.

Reprints of this 19th century text are available from several digital presses, including the Michigan Historical Reprint Series and Kessinger Legacy Reprints through Amazon.com. It is also reprinted in *UU Christian* Vol 43, no 2, Su 1988, 1-57.

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005.

Read all.

This appears to be out of print right now, but plenty of new and used hardcover editions are available on Amazon.com.

2. A course reader is available directly through Meadville Lombard.

3. Choose and read one book from among the following biographies/autobiographies of 19th century Unitarians. Many of these texts are rare books, and some can be found only in theological libraries. Most, however, are available as digital reprints through Amazon.com. I've tried to indicate the availability of each text.

Selected Nineteenth Century Unitarian Autobiography and Biography

Channing, Elizabeth Parsons. *Autobiography & Diary of Elizabeth Parsons Channing: Gleanings of a thoughtful life*. Boston: American Unitarian Assn., 1907.

Available online at: <http://pds.harvard.edu:8080/pdx/servlet/pds?id=2575037>

- Conway, Moncure Daniel. *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*. 2 Vols. London; Cassell & Co., 1904.
Several historical reprint editions are available through Amazon.
- Gannett, William Channing. *Ezra Stiles Gannett, Unitarian Minister in Boston, 1824-1871*. Reprint available through Kennicat Scholarly Reprint.
- Goodwin, Joan W. *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley: The Life of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley*. Boston: Northeastern, 1998.
Out of print, but available in libraries or through Amazon.
- Grodzins, Dean. *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002.
In print and readily available.
- Hall, Edward B. *Memoir of Mary L. Ware, wife of Henry Ware, Jr.* Boston: Crosby Nichols, 1854.
Some original copies available through Amazon.
- Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer. *Reminiscences of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880.
Probably library only.
- Pray, Lewis G. *Memoir of The Rev. Samuel Barrett, with a selected series of his discourses*. 1867.
Reprint available through University of Michigan Reprint series on Amazon.
- Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1996.
Widely available.
- Richardson, Robert D. *Thoreau: Life of the Mind*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1988.
Widely available.
- Robbins, Chandler. *Portrait of a Christian, drawn from a life: A memoir of Maria Elizabeth Clapp*. Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1859.
Available and downloadable as PDF from www.books.google.com
- Ware, Henry, Jr. *The Memoirs of Henry Ware, Jr.* John Ware, ed. Boston:
Available from University of Michigan Digital Reprint Series through Amazon.
- Wider, Sarah Ann. *Anna Tilden, Unitarian Culture, and the Problem of Self-Representation*. (Athens, University of Georgia, 1997).
Out of print, but available from libraries.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Before Class Assignment (25 pts)

Complete all course reading and write a 3-4 page response to that reading that a) summarizes your understanding of the Unitarian spiritual theology of self-culture, and b) assesses some of its strengths and limitations as a spirituality for 19th century Unitarians. Be specific in your claims and cite texts and examples to back them up.

Due: The morning of the first day of class.

In-Class Presentation (25 pts)

During our week together, each student will make a 15-minute oral presentation on his or her chosen biography/autobiography. (If students choose the same book, they

may share this 15-minute presentation. No more than 2 students may select the same book.) The substance of that presentation will be to provide the class with a feel for the spiritual life of your subject. Presentations should address such questions as: What was the nature of your subject's relationship to God/the Holy? What were the primary questions/struggles in this person's spiritual life? How does their spiritual life appear to be formed (or not formed) by the Unitarian spiritual theology studied in this class? What devotional practices sustained their relationship to God/the Holy? What about the text helped or hindered your ability to learn about the spiritual life of your subject?

A schedule of presentations will be created on the first day of class. You must submit to the instructor a written outline (2-3 pages) of your oral presentation that includes citations from the text immediately after the presentation.

Class Participation (25 pts)

In this seminar style class, the active participation of everyone is crucial to our learning. All students must participate fully in class conversation.

Post Class Assignment (25 pts)

There are two options for the post-class assignment. The length for either option should be approximately 8-10 double-spaced pages.

a. Students may create a project that integrates what we've learned in this class into either their personal spiritual lives or a context for ministry (such as a congregation or community ministry site). Such a project could take the form of (but need not be limited to) a conventional paper, a sermon, a series of journal entries, or a religious education curriculum. Regardless of the format, the project must demonstrate that the student has both digested the historical material and wrestled with its implications for either personal or collective contemporary spirituality.

or

b. Students may write a research paper that explores more thoroughly a particular person, practice or text from the tradition of Unitarian spirituality we have studied in the class. The paper must demonstrate effective use of both primary and secondary materials BEYOND those treated in class. An extensive bibliography distributed in class will help students in this effort.

Paper topics should be discussed with and approved by the instructor before the end of class.

Due Date for Final Paper: Final papers are due a month after the last day of class.

SYLLABUS

Day 1: Unitarian Spirituality in Theological and Historical Context

On our first day together we will get to the heart of the spiritual theology called “self culture” by examining its key texts as well as its theological and historical context. Our reading will focus on the work of Channing, Emerson and James Freeman Clarke, as well as the scholarly work of David Robinson, Charles Hambrick-Stowe and Leigh Eric Schmidt.

Day 2: Meditation and Prayer

We will begin to immerse ourselves in the practices that sustained the spiritual lives of 19th century Unitarians, beginning with the core practice of meditative self-reflection and branching out into varieties of prayer and meditation, including meditation in nature. In addition to our historical study we will experiment with these practices ourselves, with the intent of assessing their practicability for contemporary Unitarian Universalists.

Day 3: Meditation and Prayer, cont’d., Devotional Reading

We will continue our exploration of Unitarian meditation and prayer, and also layer in the use of text in Unitarian practices of devotional reading. Once again, our learning will be both historical and experiential.

Day 4: The Spiritual Journal, Poetry and other Writing Practices

We will examine the significant role that journaling played in the spiritual lives of 19th century Unitarians by studying the journal of Unitarian feminist and lay-leader Caroline Healey Dall. We will also look at other writing practices such as poetry, spiritual autobiography and biography.

Day 5: Mentor, Friend, Small Group and Churches: Communal Spiritual Practice

On our final day we will question the prevailing assumption that 19th century Unitarians were hyper-individualistic in their approach to spirituality by exploring their myriad forms of communal spiritual practice: from spiritual friendships and mentoring, to small groups, clubs, and worship. Significant attention will be paid to the life and work of Margaret Fuller.

Daily Schedule.

Class will last (roughly) from 9 am to 4 pm Monday through Thursday, and from 9 am to noon on Friday. Each day will include a lunch hour as well as breaks in the morning and afternoon. In addition, we will vary our days by alternating between lecture, discussion and student presentation, between historical study and hands-on practice, as well as between indoor and outdoor activity. There will be ample

opportunity to take advantage of our beautiful surroundings on the Maine Coast. Our 19th century spiritual ancestors, wouldn't have it otherwise!