

UU Identity & History

Lesson 8: Liberal Religion

3.28.2021

Objectives: Discuss the gifts and challenges of liberal religion.

Materials: Login to RE YouTube account, teachers should download lesson plan and attachments onto their desktop.

Time allotments: Suggested for 60 minute online class.

1. Zoom Welcome (as youth arrive into the breakout classroom)

- Teachers and youth are expected to log on to zoom at 11:15am (15 min before class begins at 11:30am) so that everyone can be organized into correct breakout classrooms. We want to make sure there is an attentive adult in each breakout classroom with youth.
- Greet youth and ask everyone to correct their display name as needed. Ask everyone to select “gallery view” to see everyone else.
- Staff will take attendance.

2. Zoom Icebreaker: Imaginary Ball (5 minutes, begin while waiting for everyone to arrive)

Pass the imaginary ball by calling out someone’s name! Invite youth to unmute and stand up as able. Have a teacher or eager youth start by describing their ball creatively, then using their hands to “throw” the ball at the screen. “Pass” the ball by calling out someone else’s name who is then asked to “catch” the ball, creatively describe a new kind of ball, and “throw” it to the next person. Go around until everyone’s name is called.

3. Chalice Lighting

Light a chalice at your home, invite youth to light their own chalices and say together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith, the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (from UU minister, Paul Rasor)

“The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile (superficial) compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture’s values. Liberal religion calls us to

strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.”

4. **Brief Check-in** (5 minutes)

Continue weekly ritual/check-in (e.g. sharing a joy or sorrow so that everyone feels present in class).

5. **UU Timeline** (5 minutes)

Teacher says: We have covered A LOT of history—almost 2,000 years—from 1,000 BCE and the earliest record of Jewish (monotheistic) writings to the 1920s CE and the emergence of Humanism in Unitarianism. Thank you for flying through time together! Let’s review.

Screen share lesson attachment 8a (UU Timeline Continued).

- Invite youth to read aloud the four new events.

6. **Introduction to Liberal Religion** (20 minutes)

Teacher says: Today we are going to talk about liberal religion. Liberal theology came out of the Enlightenment period (17th and 18th century CE) and was originally a Unitarian and Congregational movement. By the 20th century, liberal theology was ecumenical—a part of many different denominations/faith traditions.

Opening Discussion:

- What does the word “liberal” mean to you?
- Do you have positive, neutral, or negative connotations with the concept “liberal”?
- Do you consider yourself a liberal? Regardless if you are or not, do you consider the culture/community/family you grew up in as liberal?

Teacher Summarizes: Aside from political connotations, the word “conservative” means “to conserve,” as in preserving history and tradition, and environmental conservation. The word “liberal” means “free.”

Questions for Discussion:

- What does “free” mean to you?
- Are the ideas of conservation and freedom in tension?

Screen share lesson attachment 8b (Characteristics of Liberal Religion)

- Invite youth to read aloud the four characteristics.

Questions for Discussion:

- Did anything surprise you?
- Which of these liberal characteristics and values are really important to you? Why?
- How do these liberal values positively impact your life? How do you think they have shaped Unity? What about your other communities, like school?
- Do you think anything is missing or contradictory? What critiques of liberalism have you heard and/or do you personally have?

(Hint: individualism, primarily white/privileged movement, myth of progress, superficial social change, noncommittal, goes with status quo, relativism, lack of tradition).

7. Limitations of Liberalism (20 minutes)

**Prioritize what suggests deeper youth engagement over getting to all critiques and questions.*

Screen share lesson attachment 8c (Limitations and Critiques of Liberalism)

- Invite youth to read aloud each quote.

Questions for Discussion:

- From the quotes and images, what stood out to you? What feelings or images came up?
- A few weeks back, we learned that the Unity Christmas Pageant is 100 years old, but that many other UU congregations don't celebrate Christmas the way we do at Unity. Why do you think Unity celebrates Christmas and Easter?
- What is important about conserving tradition and history?
- How is mediating (seeking a middle path) between traditional belief and secular culture different from rejecting certain stories, beliefs, and practices?
- As we heard, individualism can divide people from each other—for example, across race, gender, class, and religion—making it harder to be in community. What does community mean to you?
- Can you think of a time when your individual freedom prevented you from feeling like you belong in community? Or from standing up for someone getting bullied or otherwise mistreated?
- Can you think of a time you have felt both your uniqueness and a sense of belonging to a group or something larger than yourself?
- What might shared/collective freedom mean? What do you think of the famous saying from civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer: “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free”?

**optional, if time and youth interest:*

- Out of the four characteristics of liberalism (mediation, flow, autonomy, and ethics), we have talked about critiques of mediation and autonomy. What do you think are some limitations of inevitable change and progress (flow)? How about limitations of personal self-improvement or deciding that what is good for you is good for all (ethics)?

**concluding questions:*

- What does liberalism continue to offer us? What parts are really important to keep valuing?

(If helpful, re-read opening quote from UU minister, Paul Rasor:

“The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile (superficial) compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture’s values. Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.”)

- Do you think the limitations of liberalism are critiques of liberal values themselves or, more accurately, how such values have been used by people?

(Hint: think back to Margaret Fuller’s quote saying that “all men are born free and equal” is important in its aspiration, even though it is not yet realized.)

- Why is Unitarian Universalism considered a liberal faith? In what ways do UUs try and offset the limitations of liberalism?

(Hint: covenantal community; having shared universal principles; the seventh principle, added in 1985, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part;” our six sources recognize our historical lineage as well as our commitment to inclusivism and multiculturalism; encouraging spiritual practice alongside social action.)

8. Hymn Listen (10 minutes)

Screen share (with audio): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdnr4fNuR74>

- Start at 1:10 (beginning is humming).

Screen share lesson attachment 8d (Spirit of Life)

- Invite a youth to read the lyrics aloud.

Questions for Discussion:

- What values do you recognize in the lyrics of Spirit of Life? It can be anything we talked about today or in the last few weeks (e.g. Transcendentalist, Humanist, Christian, conservative, liberal.)
- Which lines and words stand out to you and why?

9. Announcement: We don't have RE for the next two weeks – have a wonderful Passover and/or Easter holiday and Spring Break!

10. Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

11. Leave zoom breakout classroom: wait until all youth have left, click “Leave” then “Leave Meeting.”