

Theologies of religious education

1. Feminist theology. Feminist theology is perhaps the central theology in Unitarian Universalism today. From the Women and Religion resolution onwards, we have become increasingly aware of the ways in which religion has been inimical to women, and we have become increasingly committed to creating a religion that accords equal status to men and women. Feminist theology argues that women should have equal access to positions of power within religious communities, including ordained ministry. Feminist theology also values what has been stereotyped and disparaged as “women’s work,” including domestic activities and caring for children. Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Starhawk are feminist theologians who have been influential within UUism.

2. Existentialist theology, including both humanist and Christian existentialism. Existentialism begins with the understanding that human beings do not have some preordained “essence” which defines them, but rather that human beings must define themselves as they live—that is to say, the fact that we exist comes before it is possible to define our essence. Many existentialists see the world as absurd or meaningless, and understand that we define ourselves (and the world) by our actions. Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Paul Tillich are well-known existentialists who have been influential within UUism.

3. Liberation theology, including Black liberation theology (but feminist liberation theology is considered separately, above). Liberation theology has been most often antithetical to the liberal approach of Unitarian Universalism, with our notion of gradual progress, “progress onwards and upwards forever.” Liberation theology says, let’s not take forever to get onwards and upwards—let’s be willing to carry out social revolution to make our religious ideals present in the world here and now. The Black Power movement within Unitarian Universalism in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s had roots in Black liberation theology. Unitarian Universalism has been resistant to liberation theologies, but some UUs have been influenced by Gustavo Gutierrez (Latin American liberation theology), and James Cone and William R. Jones (Black liberation theology), among others.

4. Process theology. God, the world, everything is evolving. This has been a central theology to Unitarian Universalism, so central we tend to forget it’s there. The notion of continuing or ongoing revelation is typically a part of process theology, and process theology welcomes the insights of evolutionary theories. Process theologians affiliated with UUism include Charles Hartshorne, Henry Nelson Weiman, and Bernard Loomer (Loomer was the theologian who introduced UUs to the concept of the interdependent web of existence).

5. Narrative theology. Narrative theology is often dismissed by Unitarian Universalists as a “neo-conservative” theology, although there may be evidence of narrative theology within UUism. Rather than emphasizing religious experience, narrative theology emphasizes knowing the culture and language of one’s religious tradition; and narrative theology recognizes there is power in tradition that can be as strong as, or stronger than, religious experience—e.g., some self-professed Christian Unitarian Universalists are probably better described as doing narrative theology.

6. Ecological theology. An ecological theology says that humans are not the most important thing in the world, that we our relationship to the natural world is in some sense divine. While

widely accepted, ecological theology can be more radical than is generally recognized. It comes into conflict with some existentialist theological positions that give primacy to human efforts to define humanity. Many UU ecological theologies come into conflict with liberation theology positions that focus on the human struggle for liberation; however, ecological theologies based in environmental justice and ecojustice are consistent with liberation theologies. Ecological theology in some cases has been derived from process theology and/or feminist theology, and there can be a fair amount of overlap. In neo-paganism, ecological theology is typically coupled with feminist theology.

Bibliography:

For an overview of this topic, see: Randolph Crump Miller, *Theologies of Religious Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1995). Good, short summaries of all the theologies above, with specifics about their application to religious education.

N.B.: You will note that, contrary to common Unitarian Universalist usage, I have chosen to *not* class humanism and theism as theological positions. I feel William R. Jones put an effective end to the humanist/theist divide in a 1974 article in which he contended that liberal Christianity and humanism are actually quite close to one another—both emphasize a “humanocentric” approach to theology based on “the functional ultimacy of humankind.” For Jones, who spent part of his career as a religious educator, one key distinction between humanism and liberal theism was that humanism allowed that rebellion can be an “authentic” religious response. But today, probably most Unitarian Universalists, whether Christian, theist, and humanist, would accept that some form of rebellion is religiously authentic. Therefore, I argue that there is very little *theological* distinction between humanism and liberal Christian theism—at least, as they apply to religious education, and the ways we hope children will think and behave.