

**BEYOND THE DECEMBER DILEMMA:**  
An Adult Education Program For UU Interfaith Families



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**GOALS FOR THE PROGRAM:**

- 1) To increase understanding and appreciation our own and each other's religious traditions.
- 2) To become aware of the influence of our Christian and Jewish heritages in our families of origin on our families of creation.
- 3) To increase understanding about how our prior faith experiences frame our spiritual choices as Unitarian Universalists.
- 4) To become more familiar with the history of Jewish and Christian relations and how it might influence dynamics in our families and church today.
- 5) To develop an appreciation of rites and rituals from our prior religious traditions, which may still hold meaning and value and integrate them into our families today in a way that honors diverse heritages.

**TARGET AUDIENCE:**

The primary audience for this adult education program is Unitarian Universalists who have left their "cradle religion" to become UU but desire to integrate some of that heritage into their current family and spiritual practices. Interfaith couples who are now UU are especially encouraged to participate.

**SESSIONS:**

This workshop is presented here as a six hour Saturday workshop, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. It could also be presented as three separate sessions.

**MATERIALS LIST:**

Name Tags

Newsprint and Markers

Masking Tape

Chairs for each participant

Table, tablecloth, chalice with candle

Worksheet: Can't Live With/Can't Live Without

Handout: Tips for UU Interfaith Families

**Session Overview:**

9:00 – 9:15	Welcome and Introductions
9:15 – 9:20	Ground Rules
9:20 – 9:35	Warm Up: How Many of You?
9:35 – 10:00	The Influence of our Cradle Religions
10:00 – 10:30	What Did You Learn Growing Up? Fishbowl Exercise
10:30 – 10:45	Break
10:45 – 11:30	Lecturette: The Difference Between Jews, Christians and Unitarian Universalists
11:30 – 11:45	The Story of the Chalice
11:45 – 12:15	Jewish/Christian History
12:15 – 1:00	Lunch Break
1:00 – 2:00	What's Important To You Today "Can't Live With/Can't Live Without" Worksheet
2:00 – 2:45	Tips for Interfaith UU Families
2:45 – 3:00	Closure and Evaluation

**WORKSHOP DETAILED OUTLINE****Welcome and Introductions**

Welcome participants to the workshop. Introduce yourself, and describe your own religious background briefly. Ask members of the group to introduce themselves, their cradle religion (the religion one is first exposed to as a child) and their expectations for the workshop. Write the goals for workshop on a piece of newsprint and briefly go over them with the group.

**Ground Rules**

Ask the group to identify a list of ground rules for participation in the group. These will include an expectation of confidentiality, the use of "I" statements, the right to pass, and no put-downs.

**Warm Up: How Many of You?**

Explain to the group that this exercise is to help people get to know each other and to identify some of the issues that will come up in the workshop. Share that you will read a description aloud and if it fits them, the participants should stand up. Ask that all of the participants look to see who is standing. You will then ask them to sit back down, and listen to the next description. Ask:

- How many of you grew up Jewish?
- How many of you grew up Christian?
- How many of you grew up Unitarian Universalist?
- Would you describe yourself as religious as a child?
- How many of you are married or partnered with someone who was raised in another faith?
- How many of you have children in your home?
- How many of you have been Unitarian Universalist less than five years?

- How many of you have been Unitarian Universalist more than five years?
- How many of you became Unitarian Universalist because of an interfaith marriage/partnership?
- How many of you became Unitarian Universalist because of children?
- How many of you identify yourselves today by another religion in addition to Unitarian Universalist?
- How many of you have faced issues with your family of origin about becoming Unitarian Universalist?
- How many of you have felt discrimination based on your “cradle religion”?

Process Questions: Ask the participants to describe their reactions to the exercise. What surprised them? What was it like to be standing alone or only with a few other people? Offer your own observations of the group from the exercise. Share if available the religious breakdown of the UU community you are in: What percentage of people comes from Christian, Catholic and Jewish backgrounds? How many couples are interfaith families?

### **The Influence of Our Cradle Religions**

Divide the group randomly into groups of three. Post the questions listed below on a piece of newsprint in the front of the room. Explain to the group that the term “cradle religion” refers to the religion that they were introduced to as a child. Share that many people’s experience of Unitarian Universalism is shaped in part by their cradle religion, and that this exercise is designed to help them explore some of these issues. Participants are to take turns in three-minute intervals answering the posted questions. For the first two minutes, the other participants listen attentively but do not ask further questions or engage in dialog about the response. In the last minute if all questions are answered, the other two people may ask clarification questions. The leader will keep time, give a one-minute warning, and then say “stop.” After each participant has shared, ask the group to take the next three minutes to make observations to each other about what they have learned.

### **Questions:**

- What first brought you to a Unitarian Universalist congregation?
- What, if anything, do you miss about your cradle religion?
- If you were not raised in a home that practiced any religion, how did you feel about that as a child?
- What parts of your cradle religion do you want to maintain today, if anything?
- If you are a parent, what, if anything from your cradle religion do you want to share with your own children?

Invite responses from the large group: What were the primary reasons people gave for first seeking out a UU congregation? How many had to do with being an interfaith couple? What did people miss about their cradle religions? What part do they seek to maintain? Was there a difference between those who had been Jewish or Christian?

## What Did You Learn About Jews and Christians Growing Up?

Fishbowl Exercise:

Explain to the group that Jews and Christians often know little about how the other experience's their religions. Tell them you will provide some information about some of the important differences, but you would like to start with some childhood memories about the other religion. Explain how a fishbowl works: One group sits in the middle of the room and has a discussion on a series of the topics. The others sit around them and listen without participating. Ask those members of the group who come from a Jewish background if they are willing to be in the fishbowl first. People who come from a Christian background will be the second fishbowl. Each group will have 10 minutes to discuss these questions.

Questions for the Jewish Group: What did you know about Christians growing up? Did you have Christian friends? What made someone a Christian? What made someone Jewish? What was the difference between the different types of Christians in your town? What did you learn about Jesus? What did you learn about the New Testament? Did you experience anti-Semitism? Was it difficult for you when you became UU to come to a "church"?

Questions for the Christian Group: What did you know about Jews growing up? Did you have Jewish friends? What made someone a Christian? What made someone Jewish? What was the difference between the different types of Jews in your town? What did you learn about Jesus? What did you learn about the New Testament? Did you experience discrimination because you were Christian?

Invite responses from the large group: What surprised you in listening to the other group? What observations do you have? How well do you understand the other religion now?

## Fifteen Minute Break

### Lecturette: The Difference Between Jews, Christians and Unitarian Universalists

Offer a brief lecturette on the similarities and differences between Jews, Christians, and Unitarian Universalists. Here is a list of points you may want to cover. Be sure to note early in your talk that these are generalizations, and do not apply to *all* Jews, Christians or Unitarian Universalists.

### SIMILARITIES

There are many similarities between Jews, Christians, and Unitarian Universalists, but there are also critical distinctions, which are not always understood. Here are some similarities as described in Dabru Emet, *A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*<sup>1</sup>, with comments on Unitarian Universalism added:

- Jews and Christians worship the same God. UUs may or may not have a theist belief. Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church writes, "God is our name for a power that is greater than all and yet present in each. ...if the "G word" fits your mind more like a straight jacket than a divine garment – then simply substitute another. Spirit may work for you, or the sacred, or higher power. As long as the object of your reverence is large enough, it doesn't really matter at all."<sup>11</sup>

- Jews and Christians seek authority from the Bible. UUs seek guidance and inspiration from “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves” and “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”<sup>iii</sup>
- Jews and Christians accept the moral principals of Torah: “the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being.” The first Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

## DIFFERENCES

- Jesus: The most obvious difference is the understanding of Jesus. Christians view Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. The central truth of Christianity is Jesus Christ. Jews do not believe in Christ, and many may have little familiarity with the historical Jesus. Unitarian Universalists understand Jesus as one important historical religious figure and prophet.
- Self Definition: “For the most prevalent misconception Christians and Jews have of one another, and the single most important thing they should learn is how members of the other community define themselves. The fact is that Jews tend to define “Christians in an entirely different manner than Christians themselves do. Likewise, the Christian conception of who is a Jew is often at variance with the way Jews, themselves, characterize their identities.”<sup>iv</sup>  
 Jews define their religion as “something we are born into . . . not only as members of a faith system, but as part of a peoplehood, culture, civilization, nation and more.”<sup>v</sup>  
 Christians define themselves by the faith they accept. “It should come as no surprise . . . that Jews will likely transpose their definitions of themselves unto Christians, and the reverse, so that when Christians search out the Jew, they seek the Jew of faith only, and when Jews look for the Christian, they see him as every non-Jew who is not a member of another faith.”
- Scripture: Christians read the Hebrew Bible through “christocentric eyes”: “The history of the Jewish people appears to have meaning only insofar as it points to Christ.”<sup>vi</sup> Jews read only the Hebrew Bible and most have little familiarity with the New Testament (except perhaps for the Christmas story). Unitarian Universalists look to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament as two of the world’s holy texts.
- Salvation and Conversion: Christians believe that salvation comes through belief in Christ. Many seek to convert others because of that belief. Jews believe salvation comes through good works and following the Law, and it is not necessary to become Jewish to be saved. Therefore, conversion is not sought or encouraged. The “Universalist” in UU refers to the belief, centuries old but written by Hosea Ballou in the Winchester Profession of Faith, that all people would be saved and that “holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that the believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works.”<sup>vii</sup>

Write on newsprint these three lines<sup>viii</sup>:

“I do and am born, therefore I am.” (Jewish)

“I say and believe, therefore, I am. (Christian)

“I decide and join, therefore, I am. (Unitarian Universalist)

Ask the group whether they think these statements adequately reflect the differences between Jews, Christians, and Unitarian Universalists.

Invite responses from the large group: Were the participants familiar with these similarities and differences? What was surprising? Why is it important for us as people from differing religious traditions but who are now UU to know these distinctions? How might this play out in our faith community? In our families?

### **The Story of the Chalice**

Light the chalice, the symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Ask the group if anyone knows the history of the chalice. If not, share that an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, developed the symbol of the chalice and the flame in 1941. He worked for the new Unitarian Service Committee (USC) in Lisbon, Portugal. The USC was formed to assist Eastern Europeans who needed to escape Nazi persecution. Deutsch was asked to design a symbol to make documents from the USC look official for bordering crossings. The Rev. Charles Joy, the Executive Director of the USC at the time, defined the new symbol to the Unitarian board in Boston this way, “a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice . . . that it remotely suggests a cross was not in his [the artist’s] mind, but to me this also has merit. We do not limit our work to Christians. Indeed at the present moment, our work is nine-tenths for the Jews, yet we do step from the Christian tradition.” The flaming chalice was used as a seal for paper and a badge for agents saving refugees.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Jewish/Christian History**

Offer a brief review of the troubled history between Jews and Christians throughout history. Introduce the concepts<sup>x</sup> of supersessionism (Christians have replaced the Jew’s as God’s chosen people because the Jews rejected Jesus), anti-Judaism (the Jewish religion is inferior to Christianity and represents what is bad in religion) and anti-Semitism (hatred and discrimination against people who are Jewish.)

Share this quote from Mary C. Boys and ask for reactions:

“Most Christians learn about the relationship between Judaism and Christian (and therefore between Jews and Christians) in a way that portrays Judaism in a disparaging fashion, and presents Christianity as superior to Judaism. While this is in part a theological claim . . . it has had very real, tragic consequences for Jews, and distorted the way Christians understand themselves.”

Tell the group that supersessionism and anti-Judaism have existed through the history of Christianity. Explain that the “Nazi Holocaust was preceded by a long history of ill-treatment of Jews in so-called Christian countries and that the Christian church through its teaching of contempt contributed in great measure to Jewish suffering.”<sup>xi</sup> Anti-Jewish

behavior includes hateful words, accusations of deicide, coercions and forced conversions, and restrictions on religious practice, employment, residence, violence, and mass murder.

## **Lunch Break**

### **What's Important To You Today?**

Pass out a copy of the "Can't Live Without/Can't Live With" worksheet. Share with the group that for many of us, there are traditions from our cradle religions that are important to us to bring into our families of creation and that these often cause conflicts within UU families. Ask each participant to take 10 minutes to fill out the worksheet alone. Ask them to put a check mark in the column that best describes their feelings about each item. Ask them to form pairs; if a couple is present, they can choose whether or not to work together. Ask participants to share their responses with their partner and what they think influences those responses. After 15 minutes, process with the whole group.

Invite responses from the large group with questions such as: What surprised you completing the worksheet? Did any part of the worksheet raise feelings of discomfort and anxiety? For those of you with partners from a different cradle religion, What issues were/might be raised when you share your worksheet with your partner? What issues have been difficult in your family? How have they been resolved? How does your practice of Unitarian Universalism help or hinder these differences?

### **Tips for UU Jewish/Christian Couples and Families**

Divide the group into groups of four to five people. Try to put people from Jewish and Christian backgrounds in each group. Ask the participants in small groups to brainstorm a list of tips for UU Jewish/Christian couples and families on honoring each other's religious heritage. Ask them to consider rites, rituals, holidays, and raising children. Give each group a piece of newsprint, and ask them to write down their tips. Each group should pick a reporter to present their list to the entire group. After 15 minutes in their small groups, ask each reporter to tape their list to the wall, and take turns presenting their tips. Pass out the worksheet "Tips for UU Interfaith Families" and offer tips that were not generated by the group. Encourage participants to add others generated to this list for further reflection and discussion.

### **Closure**

Pass out 5x7 blank index cards. Ask each participant to write "I feel" on the top of one side of the index card and "I will" on the other side. Ask participants to reflect for a moment on the day's workshop and fill in the index card sentence: "At the end of today's workshop, I feel . . ." And "As a result of today's workshop, I will . . ." Tell participants NOT to put their name on the card. Collect the cards, shuffle them, and distribute one to each member of the group. Have participants one at a time read the card; if anyone gets his or her own card back, tell him or her to read it as if it was written by someone else.

Ask for any additional feedback from the group. Consider a more formal evaluation form if used by your congregation for adult education programs. Thank the group for coming!

***Worksheet "Can't Live Without/Can't Live With"***

**Can't Live Without**

**Can't Live With**

Christmas Tree  
Christmas lights outside  
Nativity scene  
Santa Claus  
Christmas Eve  
Christmas Day  
Easter Sunday  
Easter Bunny  
Easter Egg hunt  
Easter dinner  
Baptizing children  
Last Rites  
Rosh Hashanah  
Yom Kippur fasting  
Shabbat candles  
Shabbat dinner  
Chanukah candles  
Crucifix  
Mezuzah on the front door  
Bris for a boy child  
Teaching about the Holocaust to children

***Handout "Tips for UU Interfaith Families"***

Be sure your child knows about his or her religious heritage – all of it. Let them know that you weren't always UU, and be sure to honor your multiple traditions. Talk about your own religious beliefs.

Know that differences are part of the Jewish/Christian experience. Communicate about these differences with love and respect. Enjoy what's shared in common; enjoy the diversity in your family. <sup>xii</sup>

Be willing to experiment. Don't automatically close off the traditional practices of your partner. Look to find ways to see if it can be adapted for your own family situation.

Get together with other interfaith families with children. Let your children know other children like them. Talk about the challenges of interfaith families and share strategies.

Give your children skills to “stand up for our family when people attack intermarriage. Talk to [your children] when they're kids about how to stand up for themselves about interfaith family issues when you're not around.” <sup>xiii</sup>

Consult guides for interfaith families. Three good ones are *The Interfaith Family Guidebook*, *Celebrating Our Differences: Living Two Faiths in One Marriage* and *Raising Your Jewish/Christian Child*.

Check out Web sites on interfaith families. Although most of these are directed at families that are committed to raising children as Jewish, they offer good strategies. Interesting web sites include [www.dovepublishing.com](http://www.dovepublishing.com), [www.crosscurrents.org](http://www.crosscurrents.org), and [www.interfaithfamily.com](http://www.interfaithfamily.com).

Encourage UU friendly alternatives to Christmas pageants. The REACH list serve of the Unitarian Universalist Association has several family services that celebrate Hanukah, Kwanzaa, the Winter Solstice, and alternatives for the presentation of the Christmas story. See [www.uua.org/re/other/Christmas\\_all.html](http://www.uua.org/re/other/Christmas_all.html).

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<sup>i</sup> Dabru Emet, A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity.

<sup>ii</sup> Forrest Church. "A Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *UU World*, November/December 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Principles and Practices, as reprinted in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

<sup>iv</sup> What is the Most Important Thing Christians Should Know About Jews and Jews About Christians? Unauthored article on the web site of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. [www.ifcj.org/subpage.asp?id=22](http://www.ifcj.org/subpage.asp?id=22).

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Mary C. Boys. *Has God Only One Blessing?* New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000, p.208.

<sup>vii</sup> David Robinson. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

<sup>viii</sup> Adapted and modified from Lucinda Duncan, *Mixing Oil and Water*, unpublished curriculum.

<sup>ix</sup> "The History of the Flaming Chalice", [www.uua.org/chalice.html](http://www.uua.org/chalice.html).

<sup>x</sup> Definitions from class handout, Mary C. Boys, "Understanding Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism."

<sup>xi</sup> Fritz B. Voll, "A Short Review of a Troubled History", [www.jcrelations.net/res/incidents.htm](http://www.jcrelations.net/res/incidents.htm).

<sup>xii</sup> Lee F. Gruzen. *Raising Your Jewish Christian Child*. New York: Newmarket Press, 2001.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Happy, Healthy, and Interfaith", [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)