

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

by such thinkers as Kitaroo Nishida (author of *Zen no kenkyuu* Studies on Goodness, 1911) and Tetsuroo Watsuji (author of *Fuudo*, Climate and Culture, 1935), he began studying Japanese Buddhism and then Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan. He assumes religious imagination to be the key to the rise and fall of civilizations. Thus, from the outset, Umehara's thought attempted to bridge the gap between East and West in order to lift Japan and the world itself from the ruins of modernity.

Umehara's studies of Japanese culture, developed in such works as *Jigoku no shisoo* (*The Concept of Hell*, 1967), *Kamigami no ruzan* (*The Exiling of the Gods*, 1985) and *Nihonjin no anoyo kan* (*The Japanese View of the Other World*, 1989), culminated in *Mori no shisoo ga jinrui o sukuu* (*The Worldview of Forest-dwellers Will Save Human Beings*, 1991), which addresses the relationship of religion to nature. In this book he rejects the traditional assumption that the Japanese come from a homogeneous race of rice-growing farmers – first by noting that 67 percent of the land in Japan has been preserved as forest, thereby reflecting widespread worship of trees, and then by proposing an alternative view that the original culture of the Japanese is retained in the minority Ainu and Okinawan cultures. He points out various elements common to Ainu and Okinawan religious rites and mythologies, and to Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism. He interprets the well-known Japanese Mahayana Buddhist phrase “Mountains, rivers, grass, and trees, all can become Buddha” as advocating the equality of all living beings. All can go to the other world (*anoyo*) where there is neither distinction of heaven and hell, nor final judgment, and eventually all will return to this world. Today, after many stages of transformation and syncretism, Buddhist temples take care of the rites for the dead, while Shinto shrines celebrate the birth and growth of all beings in nature. Belief in reincarnation can be found in the Ainu rites of sending bears and other animals back to the world of the gods above and in the Okinawan rites of communing with the eternal other-world of ancestors beyond the sea.

Umehara reinforces his assumption by referring to the findings of archeologists and physical anthropologists, which suggest that an early type of Mongoloid people, of whom Ainu and Okinawans are the remnants, had lived throughout the archipelago as hunters or fishers and gatherers during the Jomon period (ca. 12,000–300 B.C.E.) with a highly developed pre-agricultural forest culture, exemplified by their sophisticated earthenware. Then, around the third century B.C.E., a newer type of Mongoloid people arrived on the Japanese islands with a rice-growing culture. They expelled some of the indigenous people, and mixed with others to build the Yayoi culture (ca. 300 B.C.E.–300 C.E.). Umehara asserts that the natural religion born in the ancient forests survived the transition of cultures and even the introduction of such a powerful world religion as Buddhism in the sixth century. He

believes that human beings today should reevaluate the polytheistic natural religions of the forest and view the cyclic movements of life as a whole beyond individuals, races and species. It is an ecological and practical necessity for human beings to stop conquering nature and to live harmoniously with others in order to survive in the postmodern world.

Umehara has headed archeological expeditions to the sites of ancient civilizations in China and the Middle East as well as within Japan. He served as president of Kyoto Municipal University of Arts, was the first Director General of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, and has been president of the Japan Pen Club since 1997. He is also a Kabuki playwright. He has won major literary awards and was honored with the Order of Culture in 1999.

Sadamichi Kato

Further Reading

Umehara, Takeshi. *Lotus and Other Tales of Medieval Japan*. Paul McCarthy, tr. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1998.

Umehara, Takeshi. *The Concept of Hell*. Robert Wargo, tr. Tokyo: Shueisha Publishing, 1996 (1967).

See also: Heidegger, Martin; Japanese Religions.

Unitarianism

The Unitarian movement can be defined as a radical tradition that emerged into self-consciousness during the European Reformation in the sixteenth century as an alternative to the authoritarian traditions of Luther and Calvin. Like their Anabaptist cousins, the Unitarians were suspicious of the misuse of ecclesial power to enforce such non-biblical teachings as the eternal Trinity, infant baptism, the exclusivity of revelation, and the doctrinal method of establishing worthiness for salvation. On the positive side, Unitarians affirmed a more immanent deity closely bound to nature, universal salvation, and the necessity of religious tolerance and freedom of the pulpit. Because of these beliefs, many Unitarians lived under religious persecution from both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic authorities until well into the eighteenth century. The most infamous case of this occurred when the Spanish Unitarian theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by Calvinist forces in 1553. Servetus' crime was to have published a treatise, *Christianismi Resstitutio* in 1552 in which he attacked the Trinity, orthodox Christology as it was determined by the Council of Nicaea in 325 – which affirmed the co-equality of Christ and God while rejecting the proto-Unitarian view of Bishop Arius who denied this equality – and the doctrine of infant baptism. Implicit in his views was a pantheism that found God

to be co-extensive with nature. This early Unitarian laid the groundwork for a universalist pantheism, which rejected a transcendent, sovereign, deterministic and punitive God.

Unitarianism's most readily identifiable form emerged in 1805, when radical professors at Harvard won the Hollis Chair of Divinity for their Unitarian candidate Henry Ware, thus marking the end of Congregational power at that institution. Soon Unitarianism was rocked by the even more radical religious movement of Transcendentalism initiated by the former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson when he threw down the gauntlet to the church establishment in his 1838 *Divinity School Address*, in which he went so far as to divinize the self, deny the centrality of Jesus, make nature holy, and posit a form of purely personal revelation that was self-validating outside of any form of ecclesial community. Three years later the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered an equally controversial ordination address, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. While more Christian in tone than Emerson's address, it rejected the importance of dogma, liturgy, and anything other than ethics and a gospel of love.

Theologically, contemporary Unitarianism is diverse in expression and often even questions the need for theological reflection insofar as there is no agreement as to the real or alleged object of such reflection. However, there are identifiable philosophical commitments that mark Unitarianism as a decidedly nature-oriented perspective. Historically the distinction between liberal and conservative Protestant traditions was expressed by the difference between positive and natural religion. In the context of the post-Kantian milieu in which this distinction came to the fore, positive religion stressed a unique historical revelation, a unique textual record of that revelation, the centrality of a founder whose eternal word was embodied in a spirit-guided church, and the superiority of Christianity to any other religion. Natural religion denied any special revelation while placing a great deal of value on universalizable reason. It rejected the importance of texts in favor of a renewed understanding of the book of nature. The power of autonomous natural and atemporal reason replaced the role of the historical founder. Reason operated within the framework of a radically open experience of the whole or the infinite. Further, Christianity was often seen as a religion that had begun to exhaust its resources, thus paving the way for an honest exploration of other religions. Unitarianism has long embraced the basic commitments of natural religion, but has moved them more directly into a post-mechanistic view of a growing, infinitely complex, and fecund nature.

Insofar as Unitarianism would affirm a metaphysics it would deny the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, while asserting that nature has neither beginning nor end, with the stipulation that the world of astrophysics, which affirms

the Big Bang creation, is but one world within the infinity of nature which has its own subaltern conception of creation, perhaps out of imaginary time. Transforming the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century distinction between positive and natural religions, it is perhaps preferable to speak of anti-naturalist and naturalist religions. The anti-naturalist forms embrace supernaturalism, miracles, a sovereign and external Creator, and a devaluation of creation over its Creator. Naturalist religions, which can be either panentheistic or pantheist, but not theistic or personalistic, are not only immanentist, but also affirm that nature is the genus of which the object of religion is the species. Nature is the all-encompassing category, and actually transcends the genera (classes) of all orders that occur within and as nature. Hence the term "nature" functions as both the highest category and a pre-category, that is, there is no opposition term to nature precisely because nature is all that there is, both actual and potential. For many Unitarians all-encompassing nature is itself holy while for others nature is neither holy nor unholy *per se*; it simply obtains in its infinite unfolding.

Pantheist naturalism retains some remnants of the Christian traditions insofar as it affirms that a dimension of the divine is discontinuous with the orders of nature (the dimension of *nature natured*), even though fully relevant to them. Pantheist naturalism is more radical in that it decisively moves beyond the Christian traditions by asserting that the dimension of the divine in nature can in no way be discontinuous from any or all orders of *nature natured*. This deeper dimension of the one nature is often denoted by the term "*nature naturing*," a term used by Emerson in this sense.

Within the Unitarian movement this tension is expressed as the difference between a more optimistic somewhat Christian progressivism tied to the evolutionary advance of the divine (pantheism) and a more quietist post-Christian meliorism correlated to a less optimistic view of human prospects within infinite nature (pantheism). In either case, Unitarianism affirms that supernaturalist religion remains a destructive force in culture insofar as it masks our deeper relationship to the eternal self-creating nature.

This underlying, and not always self-conscious, naturalism is manifest in both the liturgy and practice of the contemporary Unitarian Universalist Church. In 1961 the-then separate but theological similar movements of Unitarianism and Universalism joined to form a common Fellowship that is now call the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since 1961 the liturgy of the Fellowship has been shaped in ways that mark the transition to a more nature-centered worldview. Services are now dedicated to solar and lunar events as well as to the inner rhythm of the seasons. Generally the liturgy celebrates cyclical rather than historically unique events, although traditional world religious holidays are often celebrated as well, and the

services use texts from all of the major religious and secular traditions.

Native American and pagan traditions are often used to transform religious consciousness by returning to the pre-monotheistic world, a world held to be friendlier to nature than that of the supernatural monotheisms. Among the more important yearly events is the Flower Communion in which each member of the congregation is asked to bring a flower that is placed in a common vase at the front of the meeting room or sanctuary. At the end of the service, each member takes a different flower home. The Czech Unitarian minister Norbert Capek created this service before the Second World War. Capek also created the symbol of the flaming chalice, which combines the naturalistic symbols of enlightening fire and the wisdom-holding cup, which is now the central liturgical object in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Capek was executed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942 for his resistance work in which the symbol of the flaming chalice was used as a code to help escaping Jews.

Along with a strong social gospel tradition, Unitarian Universalists today fully participate in the worldwide movement of the greening of the Church. There is a direct involvement in local issues of justice and the use of resources in a way that distributes them equitably and does minimal harm to the environment. Each member of the congregation is asked to use ecologically friendly practices in all dimensions of personal and social life. In the national realm, the Association works to create laws that will bring these practices into being. On the international level, the Association has long fought for forms of just trade and reduced First World consumption. One particular focus of this concern is with critiquing the growing power of international corporations as they control the yearly sale and distribution of hybrid seeds for which they have the patents. Given that Unitarian Universalism denies the reality of a potentially salvific deity who could create an apocalypse that would rescue a few of us from our abuse of nature, congregation members feel compelled by conscience to work toward the reversal of the natural degradation partially caused by the monotheisms.

Robert S. Corrington

Further Reading

- Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000.
- Dorrian, Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805–1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Parke, David B. *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985.
- Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Wright, Conrad. *The Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986 (2nd edn).

See also: Corrington, Robert S.; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Nature Religion in the United States; Pantheism; Spinoza, Baruch; Transcendentalism.

United Nations – See Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations; Earth Charter; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; United Nations' "Earth Summits."

United Nations' "Earth Summits"

The first international United Nations' "Earth Summit," formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from the 3rd to the 14th June, 1992. It included 172 national representatives (of which 108 were heads of state) and over 2400 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and addressed the threat of global environmental degradation as nations seek economic development. The gathered national leaders signed the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity and the conference itself adopted The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, The Forest Principles, and Agenda 21, a plan for coordinating environmental and national development by the next century. The Commission on Sustainable Development was formed to monitor and report on the implementation of these declarations and principles.

The 1992 Earth Summit emerged from an earlier United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972, which for the first time placed environmental issues before the international community, and led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Program. By 1983 the relationship between environmental degradation and economic and social development had led to the formation of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission. This issued the 1989 report entitled *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development as "that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" and called for international strategies combining both environmental protection and development. Significantly, the envisioned programs include action not only at the international, but also at regional, national and local levels, and involving state and non-state actors. The United Nations General Assembly voted in 1989 to hold the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992.

UNCED was a watershed, but not only for the obvious environmental reasons. The United Nations moved toward