



## HOW TO DESTROY A LIBERAL CHURCH

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By David Cycleback

**David Cycleback**, Ph.D., is a philosopher and cognitive scientist, Director of Center for Artifact Studies, and a member of the British Royal Institute of Philosophy. He has written ten university textbooks, including Nature and Limits of Human Knowledge, Cognitive Science of Religion and Belief Systems, and Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence. His most recent book is Against Illiberalism: A critique of illiberal trends in liberal institutions, with a focus on Unitarian Universalism.

### ***A new orthodoxy takes hold:***

Unitarian Universalism (UU) has long been one of the most classically liberal, tolerant, and progressive church denominations. A haven for free thinkers and intellectuals, it is non-creedal, pluralistic, and believes in individual paths and searches for truth. Its members include everyone from Christians to atheists, Buddhists to secular humanists. Unlike top-down churches such as Catholicism, UU congregations are self-determining and democratic, each congregation picking its own minister. The national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), isn't a Vatican but a service organization to support congregations.

UU is the result of the merger of two independent denominations, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, in 1961. UU minister Rev. Rick Davis writes, “In founding our two traditions our Universalist and Unitarian forebears sought to create a religious refuge from the oppressive attitudes and practices engendered by ideological, dogmatic thinking.” Evolutionary biologist and religion critic Jerry Coyne (University of Chicago) concurs: “Of all existing religions that *claim* to be religions, Unitarian Universalism (UU) seems to be the least dogmatic and therefore the least harmful—and perhaps the most liberal and tolerant. I am Jewish and I identify with Judaism’s strong tradition of embracing viewpoint diversity and free inquiry. I’m also neurodivergent (autistic and bipolar) and was raised in an academic family that promoted intellectual curiosity. With its slogan, “We don’t have to think alike to love alike,” my local Unitarian Universalist congregation was made for me and people like me.

UU has traditionally been mostly white, and, as with many organizations these days, aspires to become more diverse and welcoming to minorities. I support this goal. I am one of the small number of Jews in UU and the only practicing one in my congregation. Further, part of my research is in neurodiversity, including how to make organizations more welcoming and accommodating of neuroatypical people.

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), however, has chosen a destructive, intolerant approach that not only won’t create racial harmony but will likely attract few minorities to congregations while driving away many liberals.

In what one UU minister has described as a “coup” by “reactionaries,” the UUA was taken over by a small group of activists who wish to transform UU into an authoritarian, dogmatic church. The UUA has adopted as a kind of theological mandate an extreme, illiberal interpretation of critical race theory (CRT), incorporating the ideas of Ibram X. Kendi, Tema Okun, and Robin DiAngelo.

Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a black Unitarian Universalist minister, spelled out in 2007 the main tenets of the “antiracism” that was already then being adopted by the UUA:

One: All whites in America are racists.

Two: No blacks in American are racist. [... T]hey can't be racist because racism in this conceptual scheme is defined as prejudice + power.

Three: Whites must be shown that they are racists and confess their racism.

As she pointed out at the time, these three tenets violate the principles of the UU covenant, misunderstand how power actually works in America, and over-attribute racism to white people.

As the three “antiracist” tenets identified by Rev. Dr. Thandeka suggest, the worst excesses of “woke culture” you can think of are now found in the national UU: Dogmatism, religious-like fanaticism and self-righteousness, racial essentialism and neo-racism, censorship, call-out and cancel culture, victimhood culture and caste systems, ideological language and language policing, expectations of ideological and political conformity, authoritarianism, punishment and even expulsion of perceived heretics.

Columbia University linguist John McWhorter’s 2021 New York Times bestseller *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* cites the current UUA as an exemplar of the new intolerance that can be found on the far left. Elsewhere, McWhorter writes, “Unitarianism has been all but taken over in many places by modern antiracist theology, forcing the resignation of various ministers and other figures. The new faith also manifests itself in objections to what its adherents process as dissent.” UU Minister Rev. Munro Sickafoose identifies “the merging of an extreme political ideology into Unitarian Universalism, and its transformation into a reactionary religious movement that exhibits all the hallmarks of fundamentalism.”

The UUA leaders promote and attempt to enforce extreme identity politics and CRT ideas such as, for example, the notion that reason, logic, meritocracy, freedom of expression, and science are oppressive of minorities. People are now to be viewed and weighed primarily by the color of their skin and other immutable characteristics. The subjective opinions of minorities are to be taken as unquestionable truth-telling. Disparity in outcome is classified as necessarily attributable to racism. Leaders push to remove liberalism, individualism, and freedom of belief. Dissent is called “racist,” “fragility,” and “harm.”

The UUA has undermined the church’s democratic processes and worked to control information and communication. Under the direction of the UUA, *UU World*, “The Magazine of the

Unitarian Universalist Association,” appears to have ceased publishing letters to the editor and has stated a new “commitment to center voices on the margins and focus on becoming a truly multicultural, antiracist faith movement,” which includes “boosting the frequency and prominence of articles about racism in the United States.” One longtime minister called the new *UU World* “an ideological propaganda organ.”

As UUA sees its views as unilateral and dogma, dissent and countering views are not only suppressed but many dissenters shut down and punished.

Longtime UU Ministers Richard Trudeau and Kate Rohde were censured for expressing dissent, Trudeau merely for asking questions in a ministers’ forum. Longtime progressive activist Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof was expelled from the UUA for writing a book criticizing the UUA’s new identity politics. Rev. Rick Davis was removed from the Good Officers program for advocating for Eklof as his Good Officer. A Good Officer’s job is to act as a proverbial public defender for the minister they represent. Davis afterward called the whole process a “kangaroo court” and “a setup to provide a predetermined outcome.” He referred to the ministers association’s discipline procedures as “truly Kafkaesque.” Rev. Cynthia Cain sums up the situation:

UUs everywhere, but particularly clergy and particularly on social media, are afraid to speak their truth. Their fear is due to their perception that not only will they be shamed, shouted down, and piled upon metaphorically, but that they may actually lose their standing with our association and consequently their livelihoods. *This I know for certain.*

Following the new UUA orthodoxy, many newly ordained ministers work to stifle dissent in congregations. They often platform only the UUA-approved agenda and censor, punish, and even expel dissenting congregants. Congregants have been publicly called out for questioning the orthodoxy and even recommending the reading of unapproved books. A few ministers have promoted the idea that dissenting congregants should be re-educated or asked to leave. One UUA leader singled out older liberal congregants as having to change their way of thinking or leave UU.

A congregant in Washington State reflects on the situation as follows: “Many congregations are more afraid of becoming split apart than they are afraid of falling under the distortions

formulated by the current UUA Junta. This fear drives many congregation leaders towards silencing outspoken voices. I have already been seriously, and formally, threatened.”

For their part, some longtime ministers wrote an open letter, in which they quit the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA). The letter expressed

[A]larm at the growing dogmatism and intolerance in our UUMA. [...] Despite (for many of us) long years of cherished ministerial collegiality, the UUMA has become for us an inhospitable place and an embarrassment. As it has been made clear that genuine dialog on the new orthodoxy will not be tolerated in our ministerial association, we cannot in good faith continue our association with it.

Another UU minister, Rev. Alex Holt, wrote in an open resignation letter to the UUMA:

Does the UUMA even care about those who have raised their voices critiquing what feels like a sin-and-salvation approach to justice? I don’t know the answers, but I do know that I cannot in good conscience be part of an organization that speaks of accountability and covenant on one hand but punishes those who disagree on the other.”

### ***Illiberalism, dogmatism, and censorship oppress minorities***

For any demographic, there is no one voice, no one view, no one theory, no one language, no one way of looking at the world. Respecting any demographic is knowing and respecting that there is a wide variety of philosophies, political persuasions, language, and opinions in the group.

Disability, skin color, or sex isn’t an ideology or a political position. Someone who needs wheelchair accessibility might be a progressive or a conservative. A saying about the autistic is, “If you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” Educator Irshad Manji points out, “Just because I’m gay, just because I’m Muslim, doesn’t mean I think any particular way.” Expectations of ideological and political conformity are the antithesis of multiculturalism and diversity. In Manji’s view, honest diversity requires more than different races and genders, but a diversity of viewpoints.

John McWhorter has said that Ibram X. Kendi’s brand of critical race theory is “not the general black view of things.” Former Bernie Sanders National Press Secretary and podcaster Briahna

Joy Gray says about her podcast guests, “I always love to talk with heterodox voices across the political spectrum, particularly those that make it clear that there is not one black voice.”

Some of the strongest objections to critical race theory and identity politics have come from racial and ethnic minorities such as Rev. Dr. Thandeka (quoted at the beginning of this essay), John McWhorter, Coleman Hughes, Bari Weiss, Kenny Xu, Batya Ungar-Sargon, Sarah Haider, Wesley Yang, and Helen Raleigh. These and other authors have noted that many aspects of critical race theory are not only racist but racist against racial minorities.

Despite its sloganeering, the new UUA political paradigm is about centering not the voices of minorities but a particular narrow ideology. Like-minded white authors like Tema Okun, Robin DiAngelo, and UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray are exalted, while heterodox minorities such as McWhorter, Manji, and Bari Weiss are dismissed, undermined, and attacked *ad hominem*. The hypocrisy is clear.

The new dogmatism and illiberalism make UU increasingly unwelcoming to many Jews. A Jewish friend resigned from his UU congregation last year due to the increasing dogmatism and groupthink. I said to him: “Being Jewish means asking questions, debating and different viewpoints. Not allowing questioning or debating would make Unitarian Universalism inhospitable to Jews.” He replied: “And—dare I say it?—antisemitic.”

Another Jewish friend who recently quit UU told me that he was scared to speak his views in his UU congregation due to the atmosphere of intolerance to different views.

Last year I had a newly ordained true-believer minister tell me she felt that I did not belong in UU for having and expressing what are perfectly mainstream Jewish views that fall well within the parameters of UU’s principles. When I relayed what she said to a longtime minister, he replied, “She should re-read UU’s principles.”

When I posted in a UU forum two essays critiquing the UUA from a Jewish perspective, a UUA-aligned minister said that these essays were “racist dog whistles” and “alt-right” (standard *ad hominem* attacks these days to any dissent by UUs) and compared me and the essays to Alex Jones. Another minister told others to ignore what I wrote because I was “white” (ironic, as the

minister was white). Yet another UUA-aligned true believer responded only by asking what I thought about “Palestinian babies in cages.”

I was shocked by their complete ignorance and closed-mindedness, but even more that it came from young UU ministers. They came across as indoctrinated zealots, and I did not understand how such small-minded people were qualified to be UU ministers. They no doubt held themselves up as social justice activists.

I then remembered that I had seen similar *ad hominem* attacks by new ministers and national leaders against others who dared dissent. For dogmatists who believe their narrow view is the only truth, anyone with a different viewpoint is the enemy. I know that this bigotry I experienced was born out of the ignorance of people who have been indoctrinated to see things only in binary ways. A self-righteous movement that categorizes the expression of any divergent thought as “harmful,” “racist,” and “oppression” and dissenters as the enemy, foments small-minded ire against anyone who dissents.

### ***Why the UUA’s approach is destined to fail***

The UUA's stated goals are to increase overall and minority membership. However, its approach will likely do neither, driving away many liberal UUs while attracting few racial minorities. Moving further left into extreme identity politics makes UU only more unappealing to most people, including minorities.

About fourteen percent of the country is black. It is simply the statistical reality that if every church wants to be, say, forty percent black, that is impossible. UU, in its traditional or current state, will not be the type of church that attracts large swaths of blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities.

In her 2017 essay “Where Are We Headed?”, UU minister Rev. Kate Braestrup wrote that UU would have to become more conservative and welcoming to a broader range of political views to attract many minorities, who are generally more conservative than UU.

Multiple national polls have shown that not only are substantially large majorities of all racial demographics against politically correct culture and the politically correct language adopted by the UUA, UU World, UU ministers, and many congregations, but the top three in terms of

opposition are American Indians (88%), Latinos (87%) and Asians (82%). Seventy-five percent of black Americans polled expressed dislike of PC culture and language.

Pew Research Center polling has shown that the far left ("progressive left") is only 6% of the United States population and is predominantly non-Hispanic white and culturally elite (highly educated and economically privileged). Similarly, a 2021 poll by Parents Defending Education reported that the "extreme woke" (those who support dismantling society, who believe that students should be taught that whites are oppressors and non-whites are oppressed, etc.) make up 6% of the population and is disproportionately non-Hispanic white and culturally elite. Within the Democratic Party, the far left is disproportionately white, with racial and ethnic minorities tending to be in the moderate and conservative parts.

In short, the far left and extreme woke is a tiny, culturally elite and predominantly white group that does not represent the views or desires of most minorities in the country. This is the case within UU, where most of the promoters of the new theology and members of congregations' racial justice groups are "white allies."

Taking various fringe political positions unpopular with most minorities, the UUA has called for the abolishment of police and for congregations to quit calling the police. A 2021 Pew poll showed that only 23 percent of blacks, 16 percent of Hispanics and 22 percent of Asians support reducing spending on police. Polls over the years have consistently shown that most members of all racial and ethnic groups want the same or larger police presence in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the UUA and national UU groups have aligned themselves with extremist Jewish groups, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, that are out of step with majority Jewish views.

A white-dominant church or congregation will not attract most racial and ethnic minorities by adopting unpopular and sometimes even offensive language and political positions.

### ***The UUA-style methods are counterproductive to racial and social justice***

Dogmatic CRT and the ideologies of Kendi, DiAngelo, and Okun are extreme approaches that oppose the commonly held ideals of most Americans such as freedom of expression, equality, and meritocracy. These and other illiberal anti-racism approaches are inherently controversial,

fanning the flames of culture wars and tribalism and making communities dysfunctional. They cause division and strife even within the political left and Democratic Party. This makes them counterproductive to social justice.

Anne L. Schneider, a UU congregant, Arizona State University political science professor emerita, and author of *(Dis)Continuing Racial Inequality: Essays on Race in the U.S.*, writes, “We need a unifying strategy, not a divisive and segregated strategy; we need ‘we’ working together in multi-racial groups as advocates for justice.” Similarly, Kenneth Christiansen, a religion and sociology professor emeritus and social justice activist, writes that guilt-based techniques, such as labeling all whites racist and white supremacist, have a poor record of uniting people for social justice. He writes, “Persons who see themselves as assets that can bring about needed positive changes will accomplish much more for the common good than persons who are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt.” Finally, Rev. Dr. Thandeka recommends that in order to effect positive change, congregants should “replace moral judgment with loving compassion” and “build coalitions...with other UU congregations and other liberal religious groups who are also tired of race-talk separated from talk about class issues.”

As we have seen, the current UUA leadership’s authoritarian, illiberal approach to social justice has caused division and strife in Unitarian Universalist congregations and groups across the country. Congregations have split, longtime congregants have quit UU or cut their pledges, many young ministers have met pushback, and there has been a record number of ministers leaving their congregations. There has been talk of a split in the church and the forming of alternatives to the UUA and the UUMA.

In mid-2022, the UUA reported the largest drop in membership and the largest drop in the number of congregations in the church’s history. In 2020, there were 152,921 members. By mid-2022, membership was down to 141,089, a decrease of 11,832 members. There are now the fewest ever UU congregations: 969 instead of the usual 1,040-1,050. Moreover, the numbers of children being signed up by parents or guardians for Religious Education (or “RE”) has declined dramatically, from 34,768 in 2020 to 20,991 in 2022, a decrease of 13,777 or almost 40%.

That negative outcomes like this are afflicting the country’s most left-leaning church shows how poorly CRT-inspired methods will work if scaled up to the broader country. UU is spending

more time on ideological purity tests and circular firing squads than on productive social justice work.

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Prof. Jerry Coyne's praise of UU. However, in the same essay, he also wrote, "Since UU is one of the few 'religions' that I haven't criticized strongly, as it is nondogmatic, liberal, and (I thought) charitable, I was truly disappointed to see it turning into The Evergreen Church of Perpetual Offense."

How this will all ultimately play out in Unitarian Universalism only time will tell. However, the plummeting membership, dissolving congregations, and increasing strife do not point to a pleasant or productive future. Instead, we appear to be getting an object lesson in how to destroy a liberal church.

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Foundation for Free Black Thought, 3701 W. Santa Rosalia Dr. #1026  
Los Angeles, CA 90008

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