

# Long Strange Trip

## Discussion Points

### Overview

*Long Strange Trip* is a six-film series documenting the history of Unitarian and Universalist thought since the earliest days of the Christian era. These Discussion Points are designed to help you lead an Adult Religious Education course using these films as your primary source.

Each film breaks conveniently into two or three Segments of 20 to 35 minutes each. These Discussion Points are divided by Segment. If you wish to offer a 14-session course, you could show one Segment at each session followed by a discussion of that Segment.

If you wish to offer a 7-session course, you would show one film at each session. Each film is approximately one hour long. I recommend if you follow this model, you show the first Segment followed by a discussion of that Segment. Then show the second Segment followed by a discussion of that Segment. The third film is divided into three Segments. At that session you would then show the third Segment followed by a discussion of that Segment.

In either case, I recommend you begin the first session by having people introduce themselves if they wish and have a brief discussion focusing on the following points:

### Discussion Points to precede First Segment

- Why have you come to this course? What do you hope to take away from it?
- Why is it important for us to know the history of our Unitarian Universalist movement?
- How does knowing our history help us in moving Unitarian Universalism forward?

It is important for you to moderate the discussion, not to lead it. This includes trying to avoid having one or two people dominate the discussion and noticing people who do not actively participate in the discussion and making an effort to encourage them to express themselves without putting them under any pressure to do so.

I hope you enjoy the films.

## Part I - In the Beginning...

### ● First Segment (24 minutes long)

- Introduction
- Before the Reformation

#### **Discussion Points for First Segment**

- Expressions of anti-trinitarianism and Universal Salvation have been around since the beginning of the Christian era. Think about the efforts of the Council at Nicaea to suppress Arius' anti-trinitarianism. Do you think the suppression of these ideas by the dominant Christian church was theological or political?
- The Christian church was essentially unchanged and unchallenged for 1,500 years. Yet within just the 16th century it changed dramatically during what we call the Reformation. Why do you think such great changes happened in so short a time?

### ● Second Segment (34 minutes long)

- Michael Servetus
- Michael Servetus and John Calvin
- *Christianismi Restitutio*

#### **Discussion Points for Second Segment**

- Martin Luther set out to reform the Catholic church. Do you think things turned out the way he intended?
- Had Michael Servetus been able to implement his dream of reuniting the three Abrahamic faiths, how different do you think our world today would be?
- Had Michael Servetus and John Calvin not accidentally met at the University of Paris, do you think Servetus' life might have ended differently?
- What is the primary legacy Michael Servetus left to Unitarian Universalism?

## **Part II - The Birth of Unitarianism**

### **● First Segment (35 minutes long)**

- Introduction
- Dávid Ferenc

#### **Discussion Points for First Segment**

- Dávid Ferenc's Unitarianism is certainly different from our Unitarian Universalism in many ways. What do you think are the common values and principles we share?
- What do you think Giorgio Biandrata's real motives were in denouncing Dávid Ferenc.
- Dávid Ferenc was not imprisoned because he was a Unitarian or because he would not accept Prince Bathory's Catholic faith. He was imprisoned because he would not surrender his right to evolve his beliefs going forward. Today we cherish our right to Freedom of Conscience. Do you think we would have that right had Dávid Ferenc not made his courageous stand?

### **● Second Segment (25 minutes long)**

- Faustus Socinus and Polish Unitarianism
- English Unitarianism

#### **Discussion Points for Second Segment**

- Were it not for the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the 17th century driving the Unitarians out of Poland towards the Netherlands and England, do you think Unitarianism would have ever spread to the West or would it still be an Eastern European religion today?
- Joseph Priestley was raised as a Dissenter, the movement John Biddle had started based on the works of Michael Servetus, Dávid Ferenc, and Faustus Socinus. Had it not been for the work of these three men, would there have been a Dissenters movement in England and would Priestley have been in a position to become the driving force in English Unitarianism and later in early American Unitarianism?
- Speculate whether or not the Priestleys would have immigrated to America had they not been burned out of their church and home in Birmingham.

## **Part III - American Unitarianism**

### **● First Segment (18 minutes long)**

- Introduction
- Socinian Unitarianism
- Joseph Priestley

#### **Discussion Points for First Segment**

- Had the Priestleys not immigrated to America, what affect might that have had on the early development of Unitarianism in America.
- Thomas Jefferson credited Joseph Priestley with converting him to Unitarianism. Had the Priestleys not immigrated to America, what affect might that have had on American democracy?
- What are the common points and what are the differences between Joseph Priestley's Socinian Unitarianism and today's Unitarian Universalism?

### **● Second Segment (22 minutes long)**

- Arian Unitarianism
- William Ellery Channing
- The Divorce

#### **Discussion Points for Second Segment**

- Although William Ellery Channing professed the Unitarian belief in freedom of conscience, he constantly denounced Joseph Priestley's beliefs and failed to recognize him as a "true Unitarian." What might have been Channing's motives for this intolerance?
- What are the common points and what are the differences between William Ellery Channing's Arian Unitarianism and today's Unitarian Universalism?

### **● Third Segment (23 minutes long)**

- Transcendentalism
- Theodore Parker

#### **Discussion Points for Third Segment**

- What do you think would have been the impact of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism had it not been for the work of Margaret Fuller?
- What are the common points and what are the differences between Theodore Parker's Transcendentalist Unitarianism and today's Unitarian Universalism?

## Part IV - Universalism

### ● First Segment (35 minutes long)

- Introduction
- John Murray
- Elhanan Winchester

#### Discussion Points for First Segment

- Do you think Universalism would have caught on in England had John Murray not immigrated to America?
- Murray was the leading proponent of the Universal Salvation brand of Universalism. Would Universal Salvation have been popular in America had John Murray not emigrated from England?
- What are the common points and what are the differences between Universal Salvation Universalism and today's Unitarian Universalism?
- Elhanan Winchester's Restoration Universalism was more popular in the mid-Atlantic states, while John Murray's Universal Salvation was more popular in New England. Joseph Priestley's Socinian Unitarianism was more popular in the mid-Atlantic states, while William Ellery Channing's Arian Unitarianism was more popular in New England. Is this more than a coincidence?
- What are the common points and what are the differences between Restoration Universalism and today's Unitarian Universalism?

### ● Second Segment (27 minutes long)

- Hosea Ballou
- The Long Decline

#### Discussion Points for Second Segment

- Although Hosea Ballou denied the trinity and was quite complimentary of much of William Ellery Channing's famous Baltimore sermon defining Unitarianism, there was never a movement to merge Unitarianism and Universalism during his life. Can you speculate on why this may have been so?
- Why do you suppose Hosea Ballou refused to have a Universalist Divinity School established?
- Do you think Abraham Lincoln might have been a closet Universalist?
- Was there anything Hosea Ballou and other Universalist leaders of his time could have done that would have prevented the steep decline in Universalism following Ballou's death?

## Part V - Evolution

### ● First Segment (31 minutes long)

- Introduction
- The Civil War
- Julia Ward Howe
- Women in the Ministry

#### Discussion Points for First Segment

- Compare and contrast the way American society viewed women (and the way women viewed themselves) before and after the Civil War. What was behind the sudden explosion of Women's movements following the Civil War?
- Which do you think was the critical influence on Julia Ward Howe's work after the Civil War - her pre-war influence by Theodore Parker, or her experiences working for the Sanitary Commission. Or were the two equally influential and necessary?
- How do you think having women in their ministries changed Unitarianism and Universalism during the last half of the 19th century?

### ● Second Segment (32 minutes long)

- Unitarian Unification
- Charles Darwin
- The Social Gospel

#### Discussion Points for Second Segment

- Why do you think it took so long after the deaths of William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker for Unitarianism to come together and unite its Arian, Socinian, and Transcendentalist branches?
- Which branch would you say was the dominant one today?
- Why do you think Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had such an influential role on both Unitarianism and Universalism? Why did it not have a similar influence on the so-called mainstream Christian faiths?
- Even though the Social Gospel movement came out of mainstream Protestantism, it seems to have had a much more significant impact on Unitarianism and Universalism than it did on other faiths. Why do you think this is true?

## Part VI - Unitarian Universalism

### ● First Segment (25 minutes long)

- Introduction
- The Hundred Year Waltz
- Humanism
- Liberal Religious Education

#### Discussion Points for First Segment

- Many Unitarians and Universalists such as Hosea Ballou, Thomas Starr King, Henry Whitney Bellows, John Haynes Holmes, and Clarence Skinner thought the two movements should merge. Why then do you think it took so long?
- Do you think of Humanism as a religious idea or as a philosophical idea?
- How do you define "spiritual" today? Can a Humanist be spiritual?
- Why did merging the Unitarian and Universalist youth organizations and religious education organizations help lead to the merger of the two movements?

### ● Second Segment (35 minutes long)

- The Merger
- The Theology of Social Justice
- The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person
- Uniterational Unitarian Universalism
- Long Strange Trip

#### Discussion Points for Second Segment

- Were the Universalists justified in their fears that Universalism would be swallowed up by the much larger Unitarian movement? What percent of today's Unitarian Universalism do you believe comes from the pre-merger Unitarianism? What percent comes from the pre-merger Universalism? What percent comes from events since the merger?
- What difference do you think it would have made had the UUA leadership told the Cleveland General Assembly that the UUA was broke before the GA made its \$1 million promise to the Black Caucus?
- If you were a Unitarian Universalist during the Black Empowerment era, the Vietnam and Pentagon Papers era, the Gay Empowerment era, or the Women's Empowerment era, will you share with us your first-person memories of those events?
- If you have travelled internationally on a Unitarian Universalist pilgrimage, will you share with us your memories of that pilgrimage?

## **Wrap-up Session**

I recommend you schedule a wrap-up session at a date after the last film session.

### **Discussion Points for Wrap-up Session**

- Prior to these film sessions, you were asked two questions:
    - Why is it important for us to know the history of our movement?
    - How does knowing our history help us in moving Unitarian Universalism forward?
- How has your answer to these two questions changed after participating in these sessions?
- How do you think Unitarian Universalism must change going forward to become a more significant influence on human lives?
  - Think about the question posed at the end of the last film. Do you have any thoughts about what our descendants might look back at us and say, "What were they thinking?"