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How Very Open-Minded

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Named for [William Ellery Channing](#), the [Channing Memorial Church](#) in Newport, Rhode Island is one of the historic congregations of Unitarian Universalism. The church is the epitome of liberal theology and church practice. Here is a statement from the church's [bylaws](#):

This congregation affirms and promotes the full participation of persons in all our activities and endeavors, including membership, programming, hiring practices, and the calling of religious professionals, without regard to race, color, gender, physical or mental challenge, sexual or affectional orientation, age, class, or national origin, and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion."

That extends even to those whose "particular interpretation of religion" includes no belief in God at all.

I came across an [article](#) on the church from the local area newspaper, part of the [East Bay Newspapers](#) in Rhode Island. Take a look at this description:

This ain't your grandmother's Sunday church. They don't talk about sinning and suffering. They don't talk about the right way or wrong way, good way or bad way. No gender, no sexuality. And surprisingly, no guilt. It's a little bit Christian, a little bit Pagan. You'll find some Episcopalian and some Greek Orthodox in there. A dash of Judaism and a hint of Buddhism. It's not afraid of Islam or feminism or politics.

Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a smorgasbord of religious beliefs. In fact, it began as two distinct religions that merged into one, seemingly all-encompassing religion. And though it's certainly not new — the Unitarian side dates back to 16th-century Transylvania and the Universalist side dates back to 18th-century America — its general concept is gaining popularity with each passing year. More and more people, it seems, are opting for an open and welcoming a la carte approach to religion, rather than a strict and exclusionary conformity to the institution.

At least the reporter didn't avoid the obvious — this "a la carte approach" is quite a contrast to orthodox Christianity.

Take a look at this paragraph:

"It's about promoting and affirming moral and ethical issues, but not under the guise of it being dictated by a particular God or gods," explained Christopher Yalanis, 36, from Newport. Chris and his wife, Mohini, are both members of Channing Memorial Church, the Unitarian Universalist church on Pelham Street. "This church is not for someone who is used to feeling guilty for not doing something they think they ought to be doing. You're not going to get that top-down force."

Nope. "Top-down force" seems impossible when there is no specific (or existent) deity at the top to force his way and will. At this congregation, moral issues are discussed without reference to any particular God or gods.

More:

"What brings us together is not that we all believe in the exact same thing. There's no creed. We don't have to say, 'Oh, I believe this and this.' Instead, what we have is a set of principles," explained Rev. Amy Freedman, minister of Channing. "We draw from many different sources — eastern society, science, learning, history, literature."

So if you're used to having one way as the only way, you might be a little intimidated of Channing and UU in general — at first. With all that religious freedom, you may not be sure of what to do with it.

"It's not a sloppy, unintentional thing," Rev. Freedman said, hesitating to equate UU with religion a la carte. "It came from a belief way back that revelation didn't end when the Bible was put together. The truth is not found in just one source, it comes to us all the time through our living and experiences and conversations with each other."

The article is worth a look. I wonder how many churches offer at least something of this "a la carte" approach to doctrinal issues, most without ever affirming this commitment in such explicit terms as is the case with Channing Memorial Church.

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