

## Antisemitism in the Unitarian Universalist Association

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I joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation almost ten years ago because of its welcoming diversity of views and freedom of thought, and its slogan of “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” The congregation remains liberal. However, a non-UU friend recently asked me if I ever experienced antisemitism, and I said, “Only in national UU spaces.”

Rigid small-mindedness, such as what’s coming from the current national UUA and seminaries, is a key source of bigotry. Whether in the left or right, binary “us versus them” thinking and caste systems always result in bigotry and injustice. Social philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote, “Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil.” (Hoffer 1951)

While this essay focuses on a Jewish perspective and experience, it could come from within any demographic. I could have as easily written a chapter about how dogmatism and illiberalism are oppressive of the disabled and neuroatypical. I’ve heard concerns about the current UUA from women, lesbians, gay, and racial and ethnic minority UUs, along with white males.

This essay has two parts, each that was published earlier in different forms.

The first, titled “How Critical Race Theory Can Be Antisemitic,” discusses how the current UUA’s dogmatic application of critical race theory as the only lens to view society is antisemitic.

The second, titled “How Intolerance, Censorship, and Dogmatism Make Unitarian Universalism Increasingly Unwelcoming to Jews,” explains how Judaism and Jewish culture are about questioning, diversity of views, dissent, and debate—all things traditionally associated with UU—and how any space that is dogmatic and illiberal will be unwelcoming to most Jews.

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### How Critical Race Theory Can Be Antisemitic

“All models are false, but some are useful.”— George E.P. Box

“People look at the world through their theories.”—Thomas Kuhn

It once dawned on me why some people believe antisemitism is a problem within some American and British progressive movements. A—I didn’t say *the*, as I know people on the left with different definitions—standard definition amongst many progressives and progressive movements is that

**racism = prejudice + power.** As these groups define Jews as part of the white privileged, or “white supremacy” (their term for white America) segment of society, that means that the adherents to that definition are saying antisemitism isn’t racism. Or, if they say antisemitism is racism, they’ve undercut their own definition. (Lumish 2023) (Norwood 2013) (Philo 2020)

Perhaps they say that antisemitism is not racism but a different form of bigotry, and that is a fair topic for debate. How to define race, what is race, and the question of if Jews are a race are interesting questions. While eighty percent are Ashkenazi, Jews come in the diversity of skin colors and shades. (Breakstone 2020) (Wikipedia 2020)

Many scholars, the United Nations, and the World Jewish Congress define antisemitism as a type of racism, and many textbooks and international laws define racism as including both race and ethnicity. Anne Frank House states that race is an artificial cultural construct and, thus, Jews are not a race, but that the classification of Jews as a race and discrimination based on that is racism. (United Nations 2020) (Anne Frank House 2017)

A Jewish friend said the question of whether Jews are a race or an ethnicity is a matter of semantics and joked, “When you find out which we are, let me know.” This all says that the world, societies, structures and oppression are far more complex and nuanced than a simplistic equation or definition can encompass.

American racial categories are not only unfixed constructs but are often peculiar to the United States. Americans on all parts of the political spectrum have long drawn the lines to suit their political ideologies and agendas. Depending on the political and ideological sentiments, Japanese, Latinos, Irish, Greeks, Ashkenazis, and Arabs have fallen in and out of the “white” category.

Armenians have alternately been classified in the United States as “yellow,” “white” and “brown.” Though, if you ask Armenians, they usually will reject any color label, as that is not how they, and many other non-Westerners, define race. I attended a lecture on Islam by two Somali immigrants. One said they didn’t like it when Americans called them black “because that’s not how Somalis view people.” Brandy Shufutinsky of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values and the Alliance for Inclusive Ethnic Studies said, “I don’t use white Jews or Jews of color. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew.” She says the prevailing “colorism” is American-centric and that “Jews predate race.” (Arzoumanian 2021) (JILV 2021)

There is no denying that the American artificial color code constructs have been socially and psychologically influential in American history and used for ill, including to justify slavery and Jim Crow Laws. Though, as this essay shows, many Jews say artificial color codes and stereotyping that have been decried are now being used by the far left to pigeonhole and oppress them. They point out the hypocrisy and that two wrongs don’t make a right. (Serwer 2021) (JILV 2021)

A problem with power as a required element in the definition is that Jews have been persecuted in major part because of the stereotype that they had power. It should disturb that some movements in today's far left use this same trope that has been and is used by antisemitic movements on the far right, including the KKK and Neo-Nazis. (Jewish News Syndicate 2022)

In the 1800s to early 1900s many elite American and Canadian universities, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, McGill, and Toronto, had quotas on Jews in part because they were perceived as being too successful. Physics Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman could not get into Columbia University as an undergraduate because of quotas on Jews. National Medal of Science winner Norbert Wiener was rejected for a professorship at Harvard due to a similar quota. Interestingly, Feynman was secular and identified himself as Jewish only ethnically. (Ivry 2014)

The Nazis and white supremacists defined/define Jews as both having power/privilege and being an inferior people/race. This all points out that there are many ways, types, and directions of discrimination, racism, oppression, and persecution.

Another common point that is brought up is that it is incorrect, or at the very least problematic, to generalize across all members about their privilege and power. There have been many poor and powerless Jews and Jewish communities throughout history, and a homeless opioid-addicted white man in rural West Virginia will likely question the existence of his privilege and power in the United States.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley, says the privileged categorization is a stereotype. He writes, "This argument leaves out the hundreds of thousands of Jews who have not 'made it' the way their Manhattan brothers and sisters may have." A Jewish friend, whose grandparents were poor immigrants from Eastern Europe, chafes at the privileged generalization. He says, "We have been listening to this white privilege stuff for 5,000 years." (Lerner 2019)

A complaint from many Jews is that some movements and people within the far left trivialize or dismiss the significance of antisemitism. Many Jews say that some progressive movements are antisemitic. That has been an accusation of British Labour and the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) movement. (Marcus 2021) (Flayton 2019) (BBC 2020) (ADL 2022)

Brooklyn College history professor KC Johnson said, "If Jews are seen as 'white' (which, in this permutation of progressivism, they are), and 'whites' cannot be subjected to racist attacks, then antisemitism becomes a trivial concern." (Johnson in Dunst 2018)

The 2019 LGBT+ DC Dyke March organizers banned marchers from carrying the Israeli flag (other flags were allowed) and banners with the Star of David symbol. A Jewish friend said, "Say hello to the new boss, same as the old boss." A gay Israeli Jew who considers the Israeli flag "the Jewish Pride flag" wrote that the "ban says I should be ashamed of my nationality and my faith rather than be accepted for who I am." (Mazzig 2019)

I was talking with an English Jewess in London. As an American curious about her perspective, I asked her if she thought there was antisemitism in the British Labour Party, and she said, “Yes, in my opinion, and generally in the left.” I said, “Some within the American extreme left use the same stereotypes about Jews as the far right.” Her response was, “Yes, exactly.”

In recent years, there have been Jewish criticism and even protests of Unitarian Universalist congregations and UU over concerns of antisemitism embedded in the UUA’s increasingly extremist political ideology. This has been due to the widespread showing of what many Jews considered an antisemitic documentary, neo-racist and one-sided theories and language about Jews and Israel, censorship, and the adoption of divisive political positions. (McArdle 2016) (Leblang 2017)

Robert Walker, director of Hasbara Fellowships Canada, says that radical left activists on university campuses often dismiss the opinions of Jews, including on issues of discrimination, because Jews are catalogued as privileged (Lungen 2018).

Walker says: “Our fellows have seen more instances where a pro-Israel side is dismissed in a summary manner, merely because many of our students are Jews, (and are) therefore seen to be privileged and therefore excluded from consideration or mainstream dialogue. . . . Their opinion is often dismissed for being Jewish or pro-Israel and seen as part of the privileged white bourgeoisie. . . . People are dismissed simply for who they are. We’re seeing this more and more.” (Walker in Lungen 2018)

Rabbi Lerner says many Jews, including he, do not consider Jews white and he considers categorizing Jews as white as an act of oppression. He says some on the far left categorize Jews as white as an attempt to paint them not as historically marginalized and persecuted people with their own unique culture and history, but as a part of the generic oppressive power structure. Lerner writes, “Jews are not white, and those who claim we are and exclude our history and literature from their newly emerging multicultural canon are our oppressors. . . . Jews can only be deemed ‘white’ if there is massive amnesia on the part of non-Jews about the monumental history of anti-Semitism.” (Lerner 2019) (Behan 2017)

Samuel Goldman, professor of political science and executive director of the John L. Loeb Jr. Institute for Religious Freedom at George Washington University, writes, “The reduction of American history to an unbroken story of racial oppression comes at particular cost to Jews. Because we have been among the greatest beneficiaries of liberal institutions, we are unavoidably targets when those institutions abandon or reject their liberal mission. A widely despised and persecuted people who thrived in America like nowhere else, Jews do not fit into the sharp distinction between oppressor and oppressed that characterizes ideological ‘antiracism.’ Therefore, Jewish experiences must either be ignored or reduced to a monolithic conception of white supremacy.” (Goldman 2021)

Pamela Paresky, of the University of Chicago's Stevanovich Institute and the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR), writes, "In the critical social justice paradigm, Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil." (Paresky 2019)

I attended a Unitarian Universalist racial justice meeting where a zealous supporter of critical race theory did not want the group to read an article by Jewish psychology professor Jonathan Haidt "because he is white." She wanted a vetter to prevent articles from such voices from even reaching group members. I am not generalizing about the group, as two group members said they thought the article was worthy of discussion, if in a different forum.

Whatever one's definitions of the terms, the rhetorical odiousness of telling Auschwitz survivors in Pittsburgh or Charleston that they are part of "white supremacy" and part of the "racist oppression" should be obvious. Following that up by then telling those survivors that any offense they take is "white fragility" is nothing short of gaslighting.

A Jewish woman who objected to being called a member of the "white supremacy" by people on the far left explained, "It is not a matter of intellectually debating the issue. It simply is offensive."

I know people on the left, racial minorities, and Jews with a wide variety of views on this topic. I am not painting with a broad brush. I know many political liberals and racial minorities do not subscribe to that definition of racism and its antiracism theory.

However, as with any theory or model, a key is how the "racism = prejudice + power" definition is considered.

The recently deceased Physics Nobel Prize winner and philosopher of science Phillip Anderson was an antireductionist and was for complexity in modeling. He correctly saw that reality, and any area within it, was far too complex and nuanced to be reduced to a simple theory or model, and said that "more is different." (Horgan 2020)

All models and theories are artificial and, thus, false representations of reality. However, when used and considered as one of many different lenses through which to view things, a theory can be useful and offer insight. Science uses multiple and often competing theories to examine an area, each theory limited but together giving a fuller, if still incomplete, picture. Philosopher Paul Feyerabend wrote, "No theory ever agrees with all the facts in its domain."

The antiracism "racism = prejudice + power" model is an interesting and useful lens to view things through. However, as with any model, it is too simplistic and must be just one of many different lenses through which to look at the complexity of racism, oppression, and society. Making it the only lens—and making it dogma and ideology, and saying that no other lenses, theories, or viewpoints can be expressed or used—is false and foolish.

Race, racism, ethnicity, oppression, marginalization, and bigotry are incredibly complex and multifaceted areas, full of gray areas, contradictions, paradoxes, and diverse personal life experiences that cannot be defined, much less solved, by one model or equation. Jews demonstrate that one can be both privileged and marginalized, that oppression and persecution can involve both punching down and punching up, and that someone can be both oppressed and an oppressor.

Author of *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Bari Weiss said that there is “good anti-racism and bad anti-racism,” and that the bad kind—one, she writes, that “has dangerous implications for Jews”—is the current neo-racist version pushed by authors such as Robin DiAngelo, Tema Okun and Ibram X. Kendi and the current UUA. Weiss says that good antiracism “reflects the idea that we should be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin, the kind of anti-racism that insists on our common humanity, the kind of anti-racism that no one should be inheritors of collective guilt or inheritors of collective innocence, that we should all be judged as individuals.” (Weiss 2020)

If the “racism = prejudice + power” definition and critical race theory are dogmatically used as the sole or key definition and lens through which to view the world, social structures, and people—as some and some groups on the far left and within today’s UUA do—it is clearly antisemitic, using dangerous and ignorant stereotypes and characterizations about Jews.

The irony is, as antisemitism where Jews are defined as a race is a form of racism, that makes that particular antiracism model racist.

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### **How Intolerance, Censorship and Dogmatism Make Unitarian Universalism Increasingly Unwelcoming to Jews**

“Debate is a sacred Jewish sacrament.” —Rabbi David Wolpe

“When I came home from school my mother would never ask me, ‘What did you learn today?’ Only, ‘Did you ask a good question?’” —Physics Nobel Prize-winner Isidor Rabi

Judaism is a traditional part of Unitarian Universalism. Judaism is unitarian, and UU lists Jewish teachings as one of its sources. Michael Servetus hoped that, in its contrast to the prevailing Trinitarianism, Unitarianism would attract Jews and Muslims.

Jewish belief is about the interdependent web of life, stewardship and repair of the earth, living ethically, and being concerned about life on Earth rather than some speculative afterlife. It is about personal spiritual paths and personal definitions of God, not to mention the inclusion of Jews who are secular, atheist, and agnostic. Most would catalog me as agnostic.

It all sounds an awful lot like UU, doesn't it? A Jewish friend said, "In theory, UUism is very much in the spirit of Judaism: ministers as teachers, not priests, congregational polity, and all that."

I'm a Maskil, a Jewish title given to me by an interfaith rabbi and Hebrew for "scholar." Historically, the maskilim were followers of the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment. The Haskalah promoted rationalism, liberalism, freedom of thought and inquiry, and the promotion of secular education, art, and sciences in Jewish culture and schools. It is the genesis of today's Reform, Progressive, Liberal and secular Judaism. Again, it may remind some of UU.

You can imagine what I and many UUs think when the radical ideologues in the UUA and UUMA demean logic, liberalism, the Enlightenment, and freedom of thought and inquiry.

### **The importance of debate, questioning, and dissent in Judaism**

Judaism is about the diversity of viewpoints, debate, questioning, and dissent.

Debate has been an essential part of Judaism since its formation, and this is reflected throughout the Torah. Israel is Hebrew for "Wrestling (debating/arguing) with God." Moses, Jacob and Abraham argued with God, with Moses winning the debate and changing God's mind! The Hebrew Bible says, "God loves it when you argue with him." One of the key Jewish theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Hershel, wrote, "Dissent is indigenous to Judaism." Catholics and fundamentalist Christians often find Judaism disconcerting because Jews are not taught to intellectually submit to a fundamentalist orthodoxy, the Torah, or God.

Rabbis teach the laity, including children, that questioning is the path to deeper understanding. A tradition of Passover is that the children get to ask the adults questions and the adults have to answer sincerely. Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary Ismar Schorsch writes, "The Seder both celebrates and circumscribes the right to question. Our children are invited to participate to the hilt by showering us with whatever questions might be on their minds. Judaism does not take refuge in dogmatism." (Schorsch 2000)

I've half-joked to my UU friends that "Judaism is more UU than UU."

However, I have witnessed UU at the national, organizational and seminary levels moving away from religious liberalism. I have seen trends toward top-down orthodoxy, groupthink, and expectations of ideological and political conformity. I have seen shaming and shunning of people who express different viewpoints that fall well within the parameters of UU's Principles.

It should go without saying that a dogmatic UUA and ministers that suppress debate and heterodoxy make UU inhospitable to many Jews and Jewish culture.

A Jewish friend resigned from his UU congregation last year due to the dogmatism and groupthink. I said, "Being Jewish means asking questions and debating different viewpoints. Not allowing

questioning or debating would make Unitarian Universalism inhospitable to Jews.” He replied: “And—dare I say it?—antisemitic.”

### **Jewish criticism of extreme left social justice ideologies**

There has been much Jewish concern over the neo-racist ideology, radical political positions, and stifling of debate in many quarters as advocated by the UUA. These include from prominent Jewish thinkers such as Pamela Paresky, Steven Pinker, Jonathan Haidt, KC Johnson, Eliot Cohen, and Jerry Coyne, and the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values. Agree or disagree with them, they are Jewish voices that should be heard in UU. I can assure you that there are Jews in UU congregations who agree with many of these views. (JILV 2021)

Jews, including within Reform and Progressive Judaism and within UU, have a wide diversity of views, and some Jews agree with the UUA dogma. I am not suggesting otherwise. Though a small minority, there are Jews who are anti-Zionist. I have a Jewish professor friend who supports critical race theory, and we enjoy debating these issues with each other.

The issue is that with the diversity of views and most Jews disagreeing with UUA-style dogma and intolerance, a UUA and ministers that expect adherence to one narrow ideology or political stance, or that say that “only Jews who agree with our dogma are truly welcome and listened to,” make UU inhospitable to many Jews.

Another Jewish friend who recently quit UU told me that he was scared to speak his views in UU forums due to the atmosphere of intolerance to different views. My mother, who introduced me to my UU congregation, quit her UU congregation and UU due to her dismay at the dogmatism, censorship and illiberalism in the UUA.

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 both essays here in a UU forum, 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 these essays to Alex Jones. Another minister told others to ignore what I wrote because I was “white” (ironic, as the minister was white). Even though I had given no opinion about Israel and am not Israeli, 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 political zealots, and I did not

understand how such small-minded people were qualified to be UU ministers. They likely held themselves up as social justice activists.

I then remembered that I had seen similar ad hominem attacks by new ministers and national leaders on others who dared dissent. For dogmatists who believe their narrow view is the only truth, anyone with a different viewpoint is the enemy.

This essay isn't just about Jews and Jews in UU, but about how general UUA trends of intolerance, dogma, and censorship are oppressive of all groups, minority and majority. I know that this bigotry I experienced was born out of ignorance and people indoctrinated to see things only in binary ways. In a self-righteous movement that categorizes the expression of any divergent thought as "harmful," "racist," and "oppression" and dissenters as the enemy, their small-minded ire would have been applied to anyone who dissented.

I had published a different version of this essay elsewhere, and a comment in the comment section was: "How Intolerance, Censorship and Dogmatism Make Unitarian Universalism Increasingly Unwelcoming to Jews . . . and All Thinking People."

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