
What
Unitarians
Believe

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NOTE

IN its first form this brief statement of Unitarian beliefs was written for young people. While it has been revised and enlarged to cover some problems of the adult inquirer, I have kept as far as possible the original simplicity of the style and wording.

D. T.

WHAT UNITARIANS BELIEVE

You who read these pages may know as yet nothing of those Churches and other institutions which are commonly called Unitarian (or Free Christian), and you may wonder what are the beliefs which mark out such a Church as distinct from others. Or perhaps you are already in touch with one of these Churches, and yet because of its freedom from a fixed creed you are still at some points uncertain about the teachings accepted by its members. Whatever your position, here is a simple outline of those teachings, which may help you to understand for yourself, and to explain when necessary to others, *what Unitarians believe*.

A Free Faith.—The first point to be made clear is that Unitarians believe in a *free* Church, with a free faith. Therefore they do not expect members to recite, or even to say they accept, any set form of belief such as a "creed". They do not think that any person or any society has a right to prescribe what others must or must not believe. Every one

of us has a mind, and the use of the mind is to think, and so to reach more of the truth for oneself; and this applies to religion, the knowledge of God, as much as to any other field of thought and knowledge. The Unitarian Churches exist to-day because in the past men and women did think for themselves, and found that they could no longer hold to the beliefs insisted on by other Churches. In earlier times in this country, as in some other lands to-day, people have been punished—even to death—for daring to think for themselves. It has taken great courage and faithfulness to found and to maintain free Churches in which no one is asked to believe anything unless his own mind assures him it is true.

But the members of a Unitarian Church do believe certain things to be true; and while they may state only in a very general way that their Church stands (for instance) for "the worship of God and the service of man", they are united as fellow-members because on the whole they believe the *same* things. What follows is a short statement of these general beliefs, set down not with the idea that you or anyone must be bound by them, but so that you may know what such a Church stands for, and accept its views, if you will, yourself. Many men and women have found in this Unitarian faith help and strength for life and for death. It may help you too, if you will try to understand it, and above all

to live by it. But nothing should ever hold you back from seeking to find out more and fuller truth for yourself.

These, then, are in outline the beliefs held by the majority of Unitarians.

God.—Unitarians believe in God; and they believe that God is One—the great Spirit who makes and sustains the world and everything within it, and our own lives.

For reasons which are explained below, Unitarians do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity (*i.e.* that God is three Persons in one), which is held by other Christians. This was at first the chief difference which separated them from the rest, and from it they came to be called "Unitarians". Many of them would now say that the most important points of difference are their insistence on freedom and their belief that God reveals himself impartially to all mankind.

Unitarians believe that God is perfect in power, wisdom, justice and love. They realize that none of the names used by men can express more than a part of what he is; but they believe that the best of all these names is "Our Father"—the name that Jesus used and taught—for it implies that God not only is the cause and source of all our life, but also loves and cares for every human being as a father loves and cares for his child; and that we may love

and trust him as a child loves and trusts a human father who is wise, good and loving.

The World.—Unitarians believe that the world is many millions of years old; men of science have discovered this, and are continually finding out new wonders about it.

It is not known how the world began; Unitarians believe that it came from God, and that everything in it is governed by his great laws, which men are learning more and more to understand.

Unitarians believe that God's purpose for the whole world is perfectly wise and good, and that when things in nature seem to us ugly or cruel or evil it is because we cannot see and understand the whole.

They do not believe that what we call evil is due to another great world-power (which some name "the Devil"), for they hold that there is one Power only, who is God.

Man.—Unitarians believe that, as science has revealed, men first began to be on the earth many hundreds of thousands of years ago; that the race of mankind grew, according to God's plan, out of other and less noble forms of life, and is still growing into more strength and skill and knowledge.

Man's life is made up of different parts, which are mysteriously combined together. His body is

formed of the same stuff or matter as the rest of the earth; it is most wonderfully made, and the more we learn about its workings the more we may reverence it and praise God for it.

Man's real self or spirit, the "I" in each one of us, is a still deeper mystery. None of us can fully understand or explain it. Unitarians believe that it comes from God and is able to grow into knowledge and love of God.

Man's life is in part like that of the animals, concerned with the feeding and other satisfactions of the body, and ready to fight and struggle against other creatures for things that seem desirable.

But his life also contains different thoughts and desires; man feels the duty of doing what is good, loves what is beautiful, and seeks to know what is true.

Unitarians believe that God has made man free to choose what kind of life he will live. They do not believe that the first human beings were tempted by a Devil to do wrong, and so "fell" into sin, and that therefore God decreed that all men in future must be sinful and unhappy, until they should be "redeemed" or rescued from the power of the evil one; for Unitarians do not admit that there is such an evil one, or that God, who is perfectly just and loving, would so rule.

Unitarians believe that man is constantly sinning, whenever he knowingly makes the wrong choice

between the worse and the better kind of life, and constantly recovering. They consider that most of the evil in human affairs is caused by such wrong choices, or by failure to understand the laws of God's world, and that it can be brought to an end if men will learn the right ways of life and will follow them.

Unitarians believe that it is God's will that man should by degrees win a perfect victory over his lower desires and passions, and train his body to help his mind and spirit in all that is noble; and that man *can* so live, for in the struggle towards good the Father will always help his children.

Our Knowledge of God.—Unitarians believe that, though no one can see God or know him in any direct way of sense or knowledge, he does in many ways reveal himself to those who will try to understand.

In the world around he shows his power and wisdom and beauty, and every fact we learn about it through science and discovery is part of God's own truth.

In the story of men's and women's lives and the history of every people we may see his guiding hand, and his will that all his children should grow and learn, even through suffering, to be nobler and wiser.

In the love, kindness and help of those around us,

God's own love is made known; for all human love comes from God, and every good life is a new revelation of him.

Unitarians believe that above all God becomes known in our hearts when we seek him (alone or with others) by the way called *prayer*—by lifting up our hearts and waiting for his message within us. They believe that "he is not far from any one of us", and that at any time and in any place we may so seek and find him for ourselves. "Religion" means simply this sense of nearness to God, the Holy Spirit pervading and inspiring all our life.

Unitarians do not believe that it is only in certain ages, or through certain persons, that God has become known to men, or that any particular Church has alone been given knowledge of him. In every race and time some people have a greater gift than others for understanding his will and his truth, and such prophets and poets and teachers can impart this knowledge to their fellow-men. But we can all know God for ourselves, and can hope to gain ever fresh knowledge of him, through daily life and work as well as through our prayers.

Unitarians believe that it is in the kind of fellowship known as a "Church" (provided that it allows for freedom of thought) that human beings can best learn to find and to know God; by their different experiences they can help each other, and also by seeking and worshipping him together they gain a

fuller sense of his presence and help than as a rule they could reach by themselves.

Unitarians believe that each one of us can help to spread the knowledge of God in the world, and that it is part of his purpose that through us some of his love and beauty shall be shown to those around us.

The Bible.—Unitarians believe that all good books help men to the knowledge of God. They also believe that, while different peoples prize different books above others, for us the Bible is the best of books, since from it more than from any other our own fathers have learnt to know and to serve God.

Though called "a book", the Bible is really a collection of many books, written long ago at different times in the history of the Hebrew (or Jewish) people. They were all composed by human beings like ourselves, who knew less than we know of many things, especially of matters of science, and who also had (at least in the earlier times) many ideas of right and wrong conduct, and of serving and worshipping God, which are now seen to be mistaken and unworthy.

Therefore Unitarians do not believe that everything in the Bible is true, or useful to-day; they hold that we should study it like any other book and, through the guidance of those scholars who have

attained special knowledge and the light given by God to our own minds, choose what is still helpful and leave the rest aside.

Unitarians do not believe that the Bible is the only "Word of God"; he is still speaking to men, and in many ways more clearly, in our own time. But they value the Bible as containing records of men and women who felt that they were near to God, and the story of a people who, by his guidance and the help of wise teachers, gradually passed from unworthy ideas about him and wrong ways of life to fuller knowledge and to purer service. Through those pages which preserve for us their prayers and efforts, and their happiness in his blessing, God speaks to us yet.

Unitarians prize most of all that part of the Bible which records the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Jesus.—Unitarians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the best man of whose life on earth we know. They call him their Leader and Master; and they may also use of him the old title "Christ", as meaning one especially chosen and gifted by God to help and lead his fellow-men.

The records we have of Jesus were written after his death, by men who all felt his greatness but who understood and explained his life and message in different ways. Their stories disagree at some points, and therefore cannot all be equally true; and

some of the details are difficult or impossible to believe. In studying what is told of his work and teachings, Unitarians try to distinguish between those parts which relate to ideas of his own time and people, and the message which he still has for the world to-day.

Unitarians do not believe that Jesus was one of three Persons in a Divine Trinity, God the Son who came from heaven to be miraculously born as man, and to die so that once for all he might bring men forgiveness from God the Father for the sin which came from their first parents. They consider that this doctrine, which was framed by his followers in early times under the influence of other beliefs then held, has no claim to bind those who now have come to think differently about the nature of God and man.

Unitarians do not believe that Jesus worked miracles that overcame the laws of nature, nor that after his death and burial he came back into his earthly body and later ascended visibly into heaven. It is not for such reasons, they hold, that men should accept his teachings and have hope of everlasting life. They realize that these stories, based as they may be on spiritual experiences, arose in a time when people knew little of the changeless laws of God's world and readily believed in marvels. They hold that Jesus' claim to be trusted and followed does not rest upon a physical resurrection or any

other miracle, but upon the power of his own spirit, still living and working, over the minds and hearts of men.

Unitarians believe that Jesus was a man, born like other men of human parents, and with the same kind of life and growth as other men; not "the only-begotten Son" of God, but the greatest of all his human sons, revealing to us, in part, what God himself is—that is, as much of God's nature as can be shown through a human being. They believe that, so understood, Jesus helps us far more than a God come down from heaven could help us; for he is our Leader and Example, born to show what human life can become when it is lived in obedience to God's will and his Spirit is allowed to work through it. He "saves" all who will follow him, by thus leading them into better and fuller life.

But Unitarians cannot believe that Jesus is the only Saviour given to men, or that those who do not know or do not accept him are shut out from the love and grace of God.

Unitarians believe that to be a "Christian" means accepting the teaching of Jesus, acknowledging him as Master and trying to follow his example and to spread abroad the spirit in which he lived; they do not believe that it means holding a special set of ideas about what Jesus was and what he did for the world or for us. Therefore they hold that a Unitarian Church may be a part of the one great

Christian Church of all his followers, as well as of the still greater Universal Church in which all the faiths of mankind have a place.

The Right Way of Life.—Unitarians believe that, as Jesus taught, the right rules for life are love to God and love to man. They hold that the deeds and words of Jesus give us in general a guide to this good life, but that we have to work out for ourselves how to apply his guidance to the problems of our own day, remembering that (as he declared) it is always better to give than to receive, and better to serve others than to be served. They believe that only in the spirit of freedom and fellowship and (above all) service can human beings live according to God's will.

Unitarians believe that to those who try to do his will God gives the strength to serve him and to face whatever life may bring.

The Brotherhood of Man.—Unitarians believe that all men everywhere are children of the same Father, and brothers of each other. They believe that God loves all his children equally and makes no favourites, and that it is his will that men throughout the world should realize their brotherhood beneath all differences of race and class and creed, and live in peace and freedom and in service of one another.

Unitarians believe that wars and other conflicts arise because men are led by greed for gain, or by desire for power over others, to forget God's great law of brotherhood. They believe that amid all the evils around us the spirit of brotherhood is gradually spreading, that the time will come when hatred, war and injustice will disappear, and that all can help to bring that time nearer.

The Life to Come.—As already stated above, Unitarians do not depend for their belief in a future life upon faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They rely rather upon their trust in the very nature of God and of man. In reverent submission before the mystery of death, they yet believe that when our time on earth is ended, and our body goes back to its elements to be used again in fresh forms of life, our real self or soul (that which lives and loves and knows God) will continue to live, in a kind of new life which we cannot now see or understand.

No one knows what that new life will be like; all the descriptions men have given of it are only fancies. Unitarians believe that it will be something better than any of these fancies, for it will be life nearer to God himself.

Unitarians believe that the future of our soul after death depends not so much on what we have believed as on what we have done, or have tried to do, in this life. They do not expect that even the

best of us will go at once to a state of perfect happiness in "Heaven"; and they are sure that God, the all-loving Father, does not send even the most sinful of his children to a place of everlasting punishment like the "Hell" of which some still speak.

They expect, rather, that all souls will go on learning or re-learning the lessons of life, there as here, and that God will show them more and more of his love and wisdom.

Unitarians do not look forward to a great "Judgment Day" after a sudden end of this world; for they see that God's way is to work slowly. The world lasts on, and will last, from year to year; and God does not wait to judge us on one final day, but judges us every hour, as our actions bring their reward of good or evil, for ourselves or for others, and in our hearts we feel his praise or his rebuke.

The thing that Unitarians most surely believe about the life to come is that we shall be still with God; and they are content to leave the rest to his wisdom, knowing well that whatever happens to us in life or death we "cannot drift beyond his love and care".

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