

What Do Unitarians Believe?

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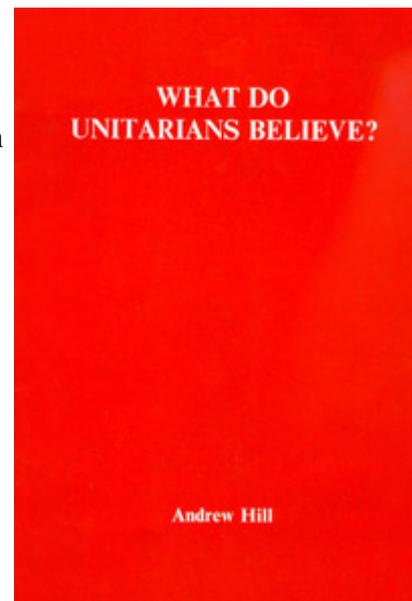
What Do Unitarians Believe?

A belief in man is central to the belief of any Unitarian for three reasons.

1 Religion is an adventure for the Unitarian, and one in which he is encouraged to do his own planning. Any adventure requires, to begin with, that one is fit and healthy. This applies equally to the religious adventure as to any other. It was the writer of the first letter of John who asked "he that does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" He might well have gone one stage further back and asked "he that does not love himself aright how can he possibly love his brother yet alone God?" Similarly for the Unitarian it is important that he knows how to believe in himself before he can even begin to believe in God.

2 Unitarians also believe in man because they consider that he is worth believing in. Although frequently men and women are capable of great cruelty both to themselves and their environment Unitarians regard this as a falling away from the essential goodness of people, perhaps best displayed for us in newborn babies. The alternative, which finds little sympathy amongst Unitarians, is to regard men and women as of basically sinful condition from which they all require automatic salvation. Consequently Unitarians can with confidence assert their belief in man.

3 Unitarianism is as much to do with the way one believes as with what one believes. A Unitarian historian has described this way of believing as "complete mental freedom ... unrestricted use of reason" and "generous tolerance". This is not a licence to believe absolutely anything, although Unitarian belief differs as between individual Unitarians. Freedom has to be related to something and because religion is a human adventure, it is related to men and women. So once again it is possible to assert that Unitarians believe in man.



What do Unitarians believe about God?

It is the Unitarian approach to God which provides its distinctive name - a name chosen by non-Unitarians. For the most part, Unitarians have accepted this name, but because it reflects only one aspect of the Unitarian religion there have been many Unitarians who have preferred not to use the name. The word Unitarian comes from the Latin word unitarius which is derived from another Latin word unitas meaning unity (this is unity in the sense of oneness,

and not unity in the sense of uniting differing viewpoints). Unitarians are those who hold that in God there is one personality, the Father, and that the Son and Holy Spirit are subordinate beings. This distinguishes them from Trinitarians who believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal personalities in the Godhead.

Unitarians have recognised that, even referring to God as Father, they are using human language to define what is essentially beyond definition. To understand God in terms of Fatherhood may be helpful, but it must not prevent us from finding other ways of understanding him. In fact, because language can be so limiting and because it can lead to misinterpretation, there are Unitarians who find it more helpful not to use the word God at all.

Contemporary Unitarians are cautious about seeing evidence for God in events which apparently contradict the natural order of the universe, such as the New Testament miracles and the physical resurrection of Jesus. Rather, because of what has been learned from the insights of scientific knowledge, they would see evidence of God within the natural order of the universe. As Walt Whitman put it: "To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle". Indeed, Unitarians arrive at their understanding of God in their experience of those things which raise men and women above the mean and petty on to a level of dignity and worth.

What do Unitarians believe about Jesus?

Unitarians place their emphasis upon the humanity of Jesus. They have come to this position from two directions.

1 The Christian doctrine of the Trinity which equated Jesus with its second person as God, the Son who was wholly God and wholly man, was the subject of Unitarian criticism. This criticism held that Jesus was not the proper object of our worship, but God the Father, and led to Unitarians holding to the simple humanity of Jesus. This direction has been particularly significant in Southern European expressions of Unitarianism where Christian contact with Judaism and Islam made the Trinity a lively issue.

2 As Unitarians believe that men and women are capable of helping themselves because their nature is basically good, they have always been interested in the likeness of Jesus to ordinary men and women rather than in his difference from them. Jesus became an example of how we might live instead of a means by which we might in some way purchase our salvation.

Unitarians have always been much concerned by the layers of Church dogma which have obscured Jesus and his teaching as shown in the gospels. However, Unitarians would be the first to recognize with modern Biblical criticism that it is very difficult to distinguish the man Jesus and his message in the gospels from the experiences of the early Christian communities from which the gospel writers came. Nevertheless it is the man Jesus who lies behind contemporary Unitarian thinking about Jesus. Two general positions on Jesus have been taken up:

1 Unitarians for whom Jesus and his message are central to the Unitarian faith. These Unitarians find that they have much in common with radical Christian thinkers of today.

2 Unitarians for whom Jesus is but one among many of the great spiritual leaders of the world. These Unitarians find Jesus of less significance in their faith. The genius of the Unitarian tradition, unlike orthodox Christianity is that it successfully embraces those who specifically adhere to the Christian position and those who prefer to centre their faith in a broader field.

What do Unitarians believe about religious authority?

There are basically three sources of religious authority:

1 An institution (e.g., the church)

2 A sacred writing (e.g., the Bible)

3 The individual.

Unitarians originally found their seat of authority in the Bible. Early Unitarians could find in the Bible no reference to the Trinity, and the impression of Jesus which they had from its pages was of "a man approved of God" (Acts 2 : 22). With the translation of the Bible into the common language of the people it became possible for more and more people to challenge the authority of the church. It was the application of human reason to the Interpretation of the Bible which laid the foundations of modern Unitarianism. Unitarians came to recognize that the authority for a person's religious faith lay neither in the church nor in the Bible but within individual people. In contemporary Unitarianism the individual conscience, guided by human reason, is the source of what Unitarians believe. This makes Unitarianism a religion of personal responsibility, resulting in a wide variety of differing beliefs. There is not, nor can be, a Unitarian creed. This does not mean, of course, that the Bible and the experiences of Unitarians of past ages are rejected. They are helpful guides in helping us to form our own religious beliefs. In the Bible may be found religious truth and insight, but the Bible in its entirety would certainly not be regarded as the Word of God. In a great many Unitarian churches because of this readings will be taken from sources outside the Bible as well as from the Bible itself. Unitarians believe as one of their hymn-writers puts it, "revelation is not sealed."

What do Unitarians believe about the church?

There are two questions here:

(1) What is the church?

(2) What is the church for?

1 What is the church?

The personal responsibility taken by Unitarians in religious belief highlights the fact that the church is a voluntary gathering of individuals. So Unitarians believe that, at its best, the church is a community which in accordance with the Kingdom of God accepts people as they are, rather than as the economic pressures and false values of society would have them be.

Complementary to this understanding of the church are those particular characteristics of Unitarianism which allow freedom to develop one's own beliefs and encourage tolerance towards those with differing beliefs. In such a church the minister has no special powers. Indeed, in a Unitarian church there is nothing which a minister may do which an ordinary congregational member may not do. The voluntary association of members in a local church is extended to district and national level (The General Assembly) where congregations co-operate on matters of common interest. The power in a Unitarian church is neither in a priesthood nor an institution but in the pews with the individual church members. This makes Unitarian churches democratic communities and democracy at its best is effective rather than efficient.

2 What is the church for?

Unitarians believe that the church exists for the worship of God and those things which have ultimate worth. This is the one thing which the church does which no other institution does. Unitarian churches are committed to social and community involvement, and, while it is right that they should be so, this is a secondary function. A Unitarian church is a specialist religious organization involved in the ultimate questions of human existence. Unitarians believe that Jesus spoke a universal truth when he said "man cannot live by bread alone". They also recognise that man cannot live without bread.

What do Unitarians believe about sacraments and about weddings and funerals?

That God may be known in all meaningful experiences of life is a well established Unitarian position. Unitarians do not believe that certain people and certain religious ceremonies provide special access to God. For the Unitarian the whole of life is sacramental and while outward ceremonies are considered helpful they are certainly not considered essential. For this reason communion is celebrated only in some Unitarian churches. Christenings, weddings and funerals receive special attention from Unitarian ministers. Such occasions are considered precious to those involved. Water is used at most Unitarian christenings but the ceremony itself is an act of dedication and thanksgiving. Unitarians do not baptise infants. Weddings and funerals are made personal to the couple or to the deceased. While it is usual for such ceremonies to be conducted by a minister, this is by no means essential. The Unitarian ministry is justified on practical grounds alone. Ordination of ministers (except in Northern Ireland) died as an essential rite towards the end of the eighteenth century.

What do Unitarians believe about death and immortality?

"What happens when we die?" is a recurrent question in religion. To many people their answer to the question has been the chief motivating factor in their religion. Others have preferred to keep an open mind on the matter and leave the question, at least as far as others are concerned, unanswered, believing that men and women deserve their salvation in this world rather than the next. Unitarians belong to the latter group. They believe that the process of dying is one of the processes of life and their aim is to approach it without fear. They are

careful that any beliefs in after-life they may have, arise, not because they are afraid of dying, but because they can approach death with confidence.

There are three general Unitarian positions about life after death:

- 1 Those who have a confident belief in personal immortality.
- 2 Those who believe that our best deeds and thoughts live on working themselves out in history. (Many Unitarians will regard the resurrection of Jesus in this light)
- 3 Those who just don't know.

Unitarian ministers treat death seriously. They are aware that funerals are for the benefit of the mourners rather than the deceased. Grief is an important process and the funeral service has an important place in it. Cremation is usual among Unitarians and flowers at funerals are less than common.

What do Unitarians believe about prayer?

Prayer is a universal religious practice. It is a deliberate striving after things of ultimate worth so as to change ourselves for the better. It is an activity of the heart rather than of the brain. Nevertheless the practice of prayer has to be learned and is the more effective the more it is practised. It can be misused and its misuse has brought it into disrepute. Unitarians try not to misuse prayer particularly by seeking to effect a change in God to suit themselves or by practising petitionary prayer (that is, by asking God to send rain or provide a healthy bank balance). True prayer aims at affecting a change in ourselves so that we by our example may change others.

Unitarians practice private and public prayer.

1 Private prayer. Unitarians have always held that prayer which is not followed by action is pointless. They have long held, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American Unitarian, "all honest work is prayer". This has meant that for many Unitarians private prayer has been equated with honest work, rather than with the devotional life. However there is evidence that the devotional life is becoming of increasing importance.

2 Public prayer. Public prayer in services of worship is more formal than private prayer and by its very nature is much more general in its thoughts. It has to serve so many different needs. While the source of prayer is in the heart, Unitarians on the whole prefer prayer in worship to be orderly. For this reason extempore prayer is only a minority practice among Unitarian ministers, most of whom prepare their public prayers in advance.

Unitarians believe that man has direct access to God in prayer. "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2 : 5) used to be a popular Unitarian text because of its stressing "the man Christ Jesus". Modern Unitarians however do not believe that men and women need a mediator to approach God. Because of this, while Unitarians may make their prayers in the spirit of Jesus, they do not pray "through Jesus Christ our Lord".

What do Unitarians believe about other religions?

As the world shrinks in size, and people from around the world travel all over the earth our attitude to other religions is important. Unitarians are uniquely placed to promote greater understanding between world religions. The positioning stems from three sources:

- 1** The realisation that the doctrine of the Trinity was a stumbling block to Jews and Moslems in their conversion to Christianity. Michael Servetus, having realised this, questioned the doctrine and was burned at the stake in 1553 at Geneva for having done so.
- 2** Unitarians, not holding that God became totally and finally incarnate in Jesus Christ do not regard Christianity as paramount among world religions but simply as an equal among others.
- 3** Unitarians have extended their principle of toleration beyond Christianity to those of other religions.

While Unitarians draw their character and tradition for the most part from Christianity, this does not exclude Unitarians from drawing on the insights of other religions, whose scriptures may at times be read from in Unitarian churches. Unitarians do not engage in foreign missions nor do they take the line of modern radical Christianity that other religions are "anonymous Christianity" whose practice and beliefs are valid, but just a little less valid than those of Christianity. Unitarians regard other religions as equally valid schemes of salvation.

Publisher's Note

This is a Unitarian publication, issued under the auspices of the Publications and Publicity Department of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. If you have found it of interest, there are many other books, short and long, simple and complex, which will help you to gain a greater understanding of the message of this group of free churches which are to be found all over Great Britain and also in many countries overseas.

For those who may be in some difficulty with religion - especially for those who are disillusioned by the dogmatic certainty expressed by some orthodox bodies ~ the Unitarian approach may have a very definite appeal. This appeal can be studied in its completest form only as a member of a congregation, for religion can best be appreciated by a group of people sharing in worship and in the social work in which all churches are bound to be concerned. But if there is no Unitarian church in your neighbourhood, there is the National Unitarian Fellowship, which deliberately sets out to cater for isolated Unitarians.

Details of this Fellowship, and the addresses of Unitarian churches, can be obtained by writing to Unitarian Information, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London, WC2R 3HY.

The books listed below can be obtained from the Essex Hall Bookshop at the same address.

Books to Read

A. Powell Davies: The Language of the Heart (A book of prayers) 40p
Bruce Findlow: Religion in People 15p
I Question Easter 15p
Alfred Hall: The Beliefs of a Unitarian 371/2p
Phillip Hewett: On Being a Unitarian 75p
Muriel Hilton: Matches in the Darkness 171/2p
Raymond Holt: A Free Religious Faith in Outline 5p
A. J. Long: Faith and Understanding 371/2p
John McLachlan: The Divine Image 45p
Leonard Mason: Bold Antiphony 371/2p
The Hinge of the Year 371/2p
Arthur Peacock: Christian Encounter 15p
E. S. Price (ed.): Adventures in Religion 40p
John Rowland (ed.): Point of Belief 40p
Alan Ruston: What is Unitarianism? 5p
Lord Sorensen: I Believe in Man 50p
Wallace Tavener: The Path of Humanism 371/2p
Kenneth Twinn (ed.): Essays in Unitarian Theology 371/2p

This is only a small selection of the books available; but they should give you enough to be going on with! If you read a few of these the Essex Hall Bookshop will be glad, on request, to send a copy of the complete list of Lindsey Press publications. (When ordering books, please add a little to the prices quoted to allow for cost of postage.)

Those of us who are associated with the Lindsey Press are sure that its publications will be found of interest to a wide public. So to anyone with an inquiring mind who wishes to explore this form of religious belief and development, we say: "Carry on! May you find new hope and new satisfaction in something that has been of great value to us."

John Rowland (Publications Officer)

The **Rev. Andrew Hill** is Minister of Ullet Road Church, Liverpool. Now aged about 30, he was educated at Manchester University, where he graduated in theology. He plays a prominent part in the Unitarian Historical Society, and has compiled a detailed account of the source documents which are available concerning Unitarian churches all over Britain. In this booklet he has provided a simple account of the approach of Unitarians to many questions .