


UNITARIANISM



a faith with a future

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## 1. IS UNITARIANISM A RELIGION ? IS IT CHRISTIAN ?

A religion may be defined as a system of religious belief and the manner of worship related to it. Unitarianism does not make authoritarian claims to truth and revelation. It has no sacred scriptures as its ultimate authority, it has no priesthood in which spiritual authority is vested, it has no creed or statement of faith or set of articles of belief which its members are bound to accept, and which Unitarians think the rest of the human family should embrace. Unitarianism has its beliefs and dis-beliefs but they do not constitute a fixed and final system. Rather is it an open system of belief and the framework of it has developed out of human experience.

The authority for what a man believes is in himself, his own heart and mind, his own conscience; and his own reason must guide him in his choice of what to believe. A church, a ministry, scriptures and human experience help him and have their own limited authority for him, but in the end a man can only honestly believe what he can—not what someone or something tells him to believe. Further, men who believe on this individual basis can belong together in a church—a worshipping community. Some beliefs they are bound to have in common, on some matters they will have to agree to differ; but in a spirit of humble seeking, mutual help, genuine tolerance, and openmindedness, men can belong together in a religious movement for their common good. Underlying all this is the belief in the goodness and value of individual human beings, in their spiritual as well as material needs, in their power to help themselves; and in the existence of something to be sought and found which fulfils this spiritual need common to all men.

The Unitarian system of belief is clearly not the same kind of thing as, say, the Christian system of belief; but it constitutes a system nevertheless and it marks off a group of people—the Unitarians—from all others.

Unitarianism cannot be called a Christian denomination—a class of Christianity which can be contained within the Christian religion—because it does not share the fundamental beliefs in the deity of Christ and the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Unitarianism is not Christian enough. But on the other hand, it is more than Christian. For more than a hundred years Unitarians have studied the other religions of man, not to prove that Christianity is the best, not just as an intellectual pursuit, but to learn from them with respect and reverence and to make some of the wisdom of those faiths their own. Thus Unitarianism is more than Christian and entitled to be regarded as a distinct religion in itself—a religion having its roots in Christianity as Christianity has its roots in Judaism.

In much of its practice Unitarianism is Christian and as a whole it has a distinctly Protestant/Christian appearance. It has gone beyond Christian limits in some directions, it refuses to go to the Christian limits in other directions. What we have is something which, after three hundred years of life, is still transitional; a new kind of religion growing out of Christianity, retaining much from its origins but reaching ahead to make something new.

I would define Unitarianism as “a liberal religious movement arising out of Christianity, expressing itself largely but not wholly in Christian forms and terms, in the spirit of the man Jesus.” It is liberal in rejecting the idea of a unique and final revelation of truth and in trusting men to discover and believe as much as they can for themselves; it is a religious movement inasmuch as it has churches and a ministry and ways of worship, all linked together in a General Assembly. It is glad to remain

Christian where it can, but glad also to discover other truth and beauty and goodness in other faiths and other lives. Unitarians know of no better man in religion than Jesus of Nazareth, but they believe that there have been others like him in the past, and that there will be others like him again.

## 2. UNITARIAN BELIEFS AND DISBELIEFS ABOUT JESUS

Unitarians are better known for their denials than for their affirmations, but their beliefs about Jesus are far more, more positive, and more relevant to the business of living than their disbeliefs. Unitarians disbelieve a great deal in the Christian creeds; for example, of the Apostles' Creed “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried” is all that most Unitarians can accept.

Unitarians reject the creedal beliefs about Jesus for a number of reasons: because some of the claims offend human reason, some of the beliefs are obscure, uncertain or in conflict with each other, some of the statements give us an unworthy picture of God. We see these ancient Christian statements as human attempts to express an understanding of two real things; the being of God and the man in history called Jesus: statements made at a particular time by men like ourselves, influenced by their own knowledge, experience and situation. Unitarians believe in the reality of God and the fact of the life of Jesus, but they reject much in these statements of the Christian Church as being untrue or unwise or insufficient.

The positive beliefs of Unitarians about Jesus are not all the same because the evidence on which they must rest is neither clear nor complete and therefore requires personal interpretation; which there has always been, not only among Unitarians.

Unitarianism allows full freedom for beliefs about Jesus to develop and change in a particular church and in particular minds, and it allows differing beliefs about Jesus to exist happily side by side in its churches and in its Assembly.

It follows that we cannot find these Unitarian beliefs in any one document or place; we must seek them in the words of individual writers. Using the 1930's as an example we find three Unitarians, William Bottomley, Herbert Rossington and Randall Jones seeing Jesus differently, but all finding him to be human and worth following, all deriving their own faith from what he said and did.

“ . . . We are left with the impression of a vivid personality who commands our love and reverence. . . . He claims our loyalty in his own human right; when we are true to his spirit we are true to the highest that we know. He will not come again . . . in a sense, he has never left the world.”

“ The great quest to which we are committed as followers of Jesus is that of the living God whom he encourages us to address as ‘ Our Father ’ . . . That at least is the unequivocal meaning of the self-asserted spiritual role; ‘ I am the way, the truth, the life ’ .”

“ We accept him as our ideal man, in a practical way, by striving to carry out his supreme commandment to love one another.”

Again, a group of Unitarian scholars said in *A Free Religious Faith* (1945): “ The records reveal a powerful personality of great mental and spiritual calibre, not only a spiritual genius and prophet, but also a poet, a sublime figure with a magnificent vision of life for the children of God.” Wallace Tavener wrote in 1943: “ What continues for us is not the miracle-working blood of a slain god, nor even the sentimental picture of the suffering beloved, but the vigour of a teaching which still moves and judges us.” And once more, Principal L. A. Garrard in

*The Historical Jesus* (1956) said of his long and continuing study of the Gospels: “ I can only say that, speaking for myself, I do again and again have the feeling that I am in the presence of a forceful religious teacher with a personality all his own . . . The supreme affirmation of Christian discipleship is not ‘ I believe ’ but ‘ I follow ’ .”

Unitarians disbelieve many of the traditional claims made for Jesus but in their place they put positive and compelling beliefs of their own which lead to action here and now. Unitarians believe in Jesus as a man to follow, not as a God to worship.

### 3. UNITARIANS AND THE BIBLE

From very early in their history Unitarians have treated the Bible like any other ancient book, trying to understand it with an honest and open mind, not starting from some assumption which would forbid them to read it honestly and analytically. The general conclusion to which they have come is that the Bible is an anthology of religious literature of tremendous beauty and value; in parts the very Word of God for us, but not wholly or alone the Word of God.

Broadly speaking, there are three ways of regarding the Bible. There is the fundamentalist way—the whole of the Bible is the whole Word of God, nothing can be wrong in it, all is to be believed equally. There is the more general Protestant/Christian way which takes into account the fruits of scholarship but still regards the Bible as a unique revelation of God's will to man, having its own unconditioned authority. A third way is the Unitarian way.

Unitarians regard the Bible as a wonderful book in which men have recorded their religious experience through more than a thousand years. It is the work of many men; writers, editors, collectors, interpreters; but it is not just literature. It is a

religious record by men who were men of God, and therefore through their words, in some measure, God speaks, God is revealed to us. We do not have to believe a single word simply because it is in the Bible, but we find much there which we can believe. The Unitarian attitude to the Bible is one of respect and anticipation, but not one of submission. Many Unitarians would say that for them it is a sufficient help in knowing, loving, and serving God—they need no other book; but others of us go beyond the Bible and find God's word in other scriptures and in so-called secular writings also. This Unitarian attitude to the Bible rests upon certain facts which, today, are accepted by many people who do not call themselves Unitarians. Four of these facts may be mentioned.

First, the fact of the existence of other sacred scriptures in the non-Christian religions. *The Bible of Mankind* by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab contains selections from the scriptures of nine religions. It is an eloquent reminder that millions of people find their knowledge of God in one or other of these scriptures, of which our Bible is but one. Facing this fact one is bound to say that our Bible is not the only Word of God.

Second, the fact of the imperfect and uncertain nature of the text of the Bible. Unitarians have been in the forefront of Biblical study which has clarified matters of date and authorship and text and order. Unitarians have no fear of Biblical scholarship destroying faith; for them it is all gain to have a clearer knowledge of the Bible and to recognize that it contains both error and truth.

Third, Unitarians accept the fact of the power of modern knowledge to help us to understand the Bible. For example, linguistic knowledge has helped to unravel and sometimes to restore the text and to distinguish fact from fiction; comparative

religion has helped to explain religious customs and ideas once thought to be uniquely Jewish or Christian; and psychology has helped us to understand personalities and religious experiences to be found in the Bible.

Fourth, the Unitarian attitude to the Bible which regards it as helpful but not necessarily authoritarian, rests on the fact that Jesus himself seems to have treated the scriptures of his day in the same kind of way. If the Gospels can be regarded as reliable—and we must allow for the possibility that they are not—it would seem that Jesus read the Jewish scriptures for their help; selecting and interpreting them in the light of his own direct knowledge and experience of God and of life itself. We see a real similarity between his attitude and ours—the attitude which sees the Bible not as having unconditioned authority over men but as being a wonderfully helpful record of religious experience to be used in the light of our own reason and conscience.

#### 4. THE RELIGION OF JESUS AND THE RELIGION ABOUT JESUS

It is in the New Testament, particularly the Gospels and Epistles, that we must look for both the religion *of* Jesus—what he himself said and did and was in his life—and the religion *about* Jesus—what others thought and said and believed about him. In the New Testament there is no single interpretation of the man and his message; from the very beginning men responded to him in different ways and understood him differently. Generally speaking, Unitarians have tried to follow the religion *of* Jesus rather than some form of religion *about* Jesus because they think that he was so much greater than his followers and interpreters; so much greater than Paul and Peter and all the subsequent fathers and saints of the Christian Church.

The “variety of New Testament Christianity”—the wide range of the religion about Jesus can be seen in the description of the separate New Testament books of such a good scholar as J. B. Phillips in *The Gospels in Modern English*. The author of Matthew “is quite plainly a Jew who has been convinced of Jesus’ messianic claim.” Mark was written for non-Jewish readers by someone who believed in the divinity of Christ. Luke is a more serious attempt to write an accurate account for non-Jews, and it is the man who went about doing good whom we see most clearly; but in the Fourth Gospel Jesus is a priestly figure who tells no parables but utters long uplifting spiritual discourses. The Epistles are mostly concerned with the religion about Jesus of Paul and others. In Romans is the message of salvation through God’s becoming man and suffering for men’s sake. In Corinthians we meet the promise of bodily resurrection. In Galatians is passing evidence that already the new faith was being variously understood. In Ephesians, Christ is now the saviour of the world, not just of the Jews; but in Hebrews he is the fulfilment of the Jewish faith. In Thessalonians there is prophecy about his Second Coming, while in the first letter of John we find arguments against the heresy that Christ was never truly a man.

We must look for the religion of Jesus himself in the first three Gospels in particular, but even here it is not easy to distinguish the real person from the writers’ beliefs about him. Setting aside the birth stories and beginning from the baptism by John, I see a real man, feeling himself called by God for a special work; suffering inward temptation and overcoming it, taking his faith out into the world, attracting followers, speaking with authority, but still worshipping as an observant Jew when allowed to do so. An authentic religious figure, sustaining his life by communion with God in prayer, angry with bigots, friendly with sinners, compassionate towards all sufferers, taking big decisions—to organise his followers, to go up to Jerusalem and give up his

life. Sometimes we see a fanatic, sometimes a man seeking his true way; but always we see a man with a great trust in God, a dedicated spiritual man, sharing some of the ideas of his own time, but a universal figure of man in the quality of his spirit. Well described by his critics: “Master we know that thou art true, and carest for no man; for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth.”

For Unitarians who find this kind of Jesus in the Gospels, the religion of Jesus needs no theological overloading such as it began to receive so soon in Christian history. In the life and words of Jesus, so far as we can truly discern them (and this is an endless responsibility) we find those two great commandments truly obeyed; and because it was a man who achieved this without ever losing all the limitations of his own age and culture, we have the hope that men can still do something like this with their lives if they can capture his spirit. Because Unitarians believe that Jesus was greater than all his after-comers, they try to follow the religion which was his in the conviction that it is more pure and more universal than the religion of any particular church founded in his name. “He knew that men are more important than any institution, or any system, or any authority.” (Robert Killam.)

## 5. UNITARIANS AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Most, if not all, Unitarians share this common ground regarding non-Christian religions. First, we recognize that there are other religions besides Christianity. Second, we recognize that all these religions have some value. Third, we do not accord to any one religion first place or final authority over all the others.

Fourth, we see them all as religions of man—human attempts in different ages and cultures to express man's awareness of the divine and of his own spiritual nature and of the relationship between God and man and the universe. Fifth, we believe that behind all the religions of man there is the divine reality, greater than any one of them, which in most religions is called God.

In practice, three different Unitarian attitudes can be seen today. First, the largest group of Unitarians consists of those who respect the non-Christian religions but make no use of them; they are able and content to express their own faith purely in Christian terms. The early Unitarians were all of this type and the attitude is still common, notwithstanding our wider and more immediate knowledge of other faiths. Second, the smallest group of Unitarians consists of those whose own faith is made up of something from several religions and who work and hope for one universal world religion in the place of the separate religions we have now. In British Unitarianism, the great exponent of this view was the Rev. Will Hayes who published two books of services about which he said, "The services are universalist in conception. I believe that the religion of the future will be a world religion." The services contain many fine things and each one is made up of material from many religions. Another expression of this 'universalism' can be seen in the modern Community Church of New York where festivals of several religions are kept at their appropriate times and where, in every service, those present pledge "the allegiance of our hands and hearts" to "the Church Universal, which is the depository of all ancient wisdom and the school of all modern thought . . ."

A middle path between these two attitudes to the non-Christian religions is taken by those Unitarians who believe that our faith must find expression in one of the great religious traditions but may be helped by contact with the others. For

Unitarians, the Christian forms and architecture, the words like faith, grace, sin, salvation; the person of Jesus, and symbols such as the cross, the book, the table—these will best form the vehicle of our faith. But from the non-Christian religions much enriching help is to be derived: concepts of God, views of man, teaching on prayer and worship, ethical insights, spiritual wisdom which can illuminate those things in our own tradition which are obscure or have become commonplace. Those who take this view believe in the need for different religions and their power to help one another through continuous contact which is co-operative rather than competitive.

But why do Unitarians accord value to all the non-Christian religions when traditional Christianity has for so long claimed a supreme and unique place for itself? First, we find in people of every faith—in their sense of God, their spirit of brotherhood, their ethical outlook—evidence of some truth and value in all religions. Second, we find in the scriptures of all religions some words which ring true—the attempt of honest men to express their spiritual experience and understanding. Third, we find similarities in forms and practices among the various religions suggesting that every religion is an attempt to express the divine, in every case imperfectly, but in most cases claiming uniqueness and finality. Fourth, and not least, Unitarians believe in One God who is the Light of the World and they see that light shining through all the religions of man, sometimes bright, sometimes dim, but always the same light everywhere.

## 6. WHAT DO UNITARIANS MEAN BY GOD ?

This question is wider than "Do Unitarians believe in God?" or "What do Unitarians know about God?" and it achieves a useful reversal of thought. It asks us to begin at the human end, without assuming the reality of God at the outset, to look at



human thought and belief and experience and to see what amongst all of that is given the name 'God' by Unitarians. A survey of three Unitarian discussions shows the wide range of meaning which Unitarians give to God but also reveals some clearly common ground. It also shows how Unitarian thought about God is affected by the climate of thought of each generation and how some Unitarians try to speak of God in a way which will be meaningful in their own time.

Dr. Alfred Hall in *The Beliefs of a Unitarian* the thoughts of which date from 1910, sees God as "a powerful controlling intelligence over all" having "not less reason and not less purpose than his sentient creatures." God is personal, but not as a Being apart. He is the life in all and only he is fully personal. As man grows in personality he enters more fully into the life of God. We find reason, in the experience of worship, to think of God as a God who cares, who can be called "Father," who can win our love. God is in man also, and speaks through the voice of conscience; there is a real association between right living and a true knowledge of God. To believe in the Unity of God is both rational and scriptural; we experience it for ourselves, and the Bible teaches it. God speaks in many ways and is revealing himself to man progressively, and "not only religion but all that is true and noble in life is inspired by God."

The Unitarian scholars comprising the Commission responsible for *A Free Religious Faith* (1945) were very aware of challenges to belief in God coming from science and psychology and materialism. But they find God present in the world and manifest in absolute values of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. They reject the Barthian view that man and God are far apart and that the initiative is with God. On the contrary, there is, they say "community of nature between man and God," there is something of God in man which helps him to know God; "God is the knowledge he seeks, God is in the seeker himself." Revelation is

always personal and comes not as precise information but as truths and insights concerning God. It is continuous and incomplete and no revelation is infallible. These Unitarians distinguish between moral intuition and social conscience and assert that it is the former which is "immediate and divine" and "spiritually authoritative." "It is because the Divine Light shines within him that he (man) is disturbed—that he strives towards God."

Phillip Hewett in *An Unfettered Faith* (1955) is much aware of the doubts of his time and speaks of "The Thought of the Divine" rather than "belief about God." He shares the traditional Unitarian distaste for firm definitions of God but manages to say in non-religious language, that God is above man and also within him. But he does not want to say over-much about 'the divine.' "This is not lack of faith" he says, "It is simply a refusal to claim certified knowledge in a sphere where, from the nature of things, it is not attainable." If we live the highest life we can, consciousness of God will come from so doing, whatever words we use to interpret it.

Unitarians then, mean by God, that which is vaster than man and yet within man calling him to fullness of life. They see God present in the lives of some who cannot find him in their own thoughts and therefore they refuse to test any man's consciousness of God with any statement of belief about him. Their churches are usually dedicated to "the worship of God" and they welcome all who feel able to share the worship and life of the church, without asking them what they mean by God. Unitarians are humble before the mystery "within which we are set" and unwilling to dogmatize about God. Man, they believe, can know something of God, but not all. We see in part, all our images of God are insufficient.

## 7. UNITARIANS FACING LIFE AND DEATH

Unitarians are not deniers of life. Religion is not for them, at their best, a Sunday affair either unrelated to daily life or opposed to it. On the contrary, they cannot think of religion apart from life and through all their history they have done much to encourage fullness of life here and now, for its own sake, as the proper application of the second great commandment to “love thy neighbour as thyself.” The Unitarian contribution to social progress in Britain has been large indeed in proportion to the membership of the Unitarian churches.

In a series of leaflets by Unitarian lay men and women called “What Unitarianism Means to Me” two significant attitudes can be discerned. First, there is acceptance of life—no escapism, no condemnation of life, no “pie in the sky”—these are people living in the world as it is, not pining for some utopian trouble-free world, but often working to make better the life of here and now. Second, there is the attitude of service in life or through life; the living for others by individuals in personal or social or political service, and the living for others by churches which are active in the community rather than just living for themselves. In these testimonies of lay Unitarians there is no harping on human sinfulness, no wish to leave everything to some transcendent God. There is no suggestion that belief is more important than living, that prayer is more important than living, that membership of the church is more important than living. Religion is for these Unitarians (and they are typical) something wholly bound up with this life and giving it an extra quality or dimension—its height and depth and meaning and value. At their best, Unitarians work for a world undivided by barriers of religion or politics or race or colour or class, believing that such barriers create fear and sustain inequality. Unitarians face life, the whole

of life, with zest and acceptance, in the belief that it is permeated with the Divine, that God is to be served and enjoyed here and now.

But Unitarians have also had their thoughts about the ultimate future and the nature of human destiny. Principal Weatherall in the 1938 Essex Hall Lecture said, “the Unitarians are significant in that they believe in and preach the Immortality of the Soul.” But since then (and even earlier) Unitarians have shared in the general decline of belief in survival or immortality. The 1945 report, *A Free Religious Faith*, expresses the view that Unitarian belief in the survival of personality ranges from “acquiescence in the sense of eternal life here and now felt in those moments of intense experience which transcend the awareness of time” to the belief that we “will have the opportunity to continue the work (we) have begun and to learn from the mistakes (we) have made in the past.” Unitarians are willing to consider all the evidence for survival and all the arguments for immortality but they have not been able to reach agreed certainty upon some teaching about human destiny which they wish to proclaim to others. Many Unitarians accept the lack of certainty and live their present lives as well as they can without any sure and certain hope of something more. But others have faith that there is more life than this we know now; either in quantity of life or quality of life or both.

Out of the Unitarian view of life as being permeated with the spirit of God, as possessing a spiritual dimension known in the heights and depths of human experience, as a life in which absolute values of truth, beauty and goodness are manifested, as a life showing us death and renewal in the processes of nature; we can see death (and birth) as natural episodes in a larger life of the spirit as well as seeing them as end and beginning of the life of the flesh. Reason still presents many unanswerable questions but this kind of awareness helps many Unitarians to find in life

itself reason to live as if immortal, reason to strive to enter into eternal life here and now. Basil Viney's conclusion in *Immortality and You* will satisfy many Unitarians today: "Yet, after all, it is best and wisest to live one life at a time; even one day at a time. It is more grateful to God to trust in him for the future, and serve and enjoy him NOW."

## 8. A FAITH WITH A FUTURE

Unitarianism, considered as a way in religion, had its beginnings in the lives of various men in different places and generations, not in a single divine revelation given to one man or one group of men. Servetus, Socinus, Bidle, Firmin, Lindsey, Priestley, all dared to trust their own knowledge and conviction rather than the established teaching of their day. In time, organisation followed the first few individuals but it has never been tight or confining and Unitarian beliefs have changed and developed with the growth of human knowledge while the 'way' based on tolerance, sincerity and trust in the individual has continued and strengthened with the years. Unitarianism has a future because, as its past shows so well, it is not chained to past teaching or custom, it encourages growth in wisdom always.

Again, it has a future because it looks to human experience for understanding rather than to a divine revelation. It looks for the divine spirit in the human situation; in the life of Jesus and the lives of others, in the Bible and all other scriptures, alike regarded as the work of inspired men, and, not least, it looks to human deeds for new or renewed awareness of the divine. It does not have to defend some final teaching based on past revelation; it trusts in universal inspiration—that in every age, men who truly seek the light will find it.

Unitarianism has a future because it is central to its tradition to strive for simplicity in religion; a simple faith sincerely held.

It does not pretend or hope to have all the answers; sufficient for living is the kind of simple faith contained in the two great commandments commended by Jesus. Unitarianism can therefore allow room for doubt, scepticism and agnosticism, and indeed, recognizes that for the person who goes deep in search of faith these are as much a part of the religious experience as faith, knowledge and belief.

Unitarianism has a future because it is wholly life-affirming, welcoming the full experience of present living as an opportunity for knowledge and service and joy; welcoming new knowledge of every kind, combating superstition and ignorance, fostering the spread of wisdom and understanding, and seeking always to weave a web of human brotherhood, the world over, with the thread of love, truth and sincerity. Unitarianism, at its best, is "religion-in-life," an expression of the divine possibilities of life here and now. It is continuously concerned for the heights and depths of human experience, to see to the limits and beyond, but its respect for human reason does not allow it to speak dogmatically of that which is hidden or uncertain.

Unitarianism has a future because it rests not upon a book or a teaching or an inspired founder or an organisation or particular forms or established rites and symbols, but upon the spirit of man and the divine encounter therein between man and God. It trusts man more than his contrivances and through man it glimpses God, though always aware that its view is incomplete and its descriptions of God insufficient.

Our present world is a challenging one for men of every faith, and for every faith enshrined in an organisation and a teaching as one of the religions of man. Increasing knowledge brings peril as well as comfort, increasing population presents formidable material problems and thrusts all men closer together; we are sharing in a great revolution which will continue through much

if not all the future we can see. In such a situation, religion which has no power to change, to act or to understand cannot hope to serve or, perhaps, to survive. On the other hand, both present and future men will need the insights of religion, the possibility of faith perhaps more than men have ever needed these before. A religious movement which has its true being in the spirit of man and the spirit of God and dares to put its trust still in life, liberty, tolerance, truth, goodness and love, is certain to prevail strongly and persist vigorously to the glory of God and the wellbeing of men.

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