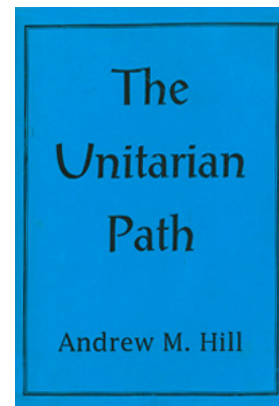


# The Unitarian Path

By Andrew M. Hill © 1994



## Contents

[The Unitarian Path in 1 Sentence](#)

[The Unitarian Path in 1 Paragraph](#)

[The Unitarian Path in 1 Chapter](#)

[The Unitarian Path in 10 Chapters](#)

[1 Religious Community](#)

[2 Ritual and forms of worship](#)

[3 Ethics](#)

[4 Social and Political Involvement](#)

[5 Scripture and Myth](#)

[6 God and the Human Person](#)

[7 Aesthetics and Arts](#)

[8 Spirituality](#)

[9 Mediating Transcendence](#)

[10 Religious Intention](#)

## Preface

This little book grew out of material used over many years of ministry in Edinburgh. It is designed for the space between introductory leaflets about the Unitarian path and more extensive treatments. 'The Unitarian Path in 10 chapters' follows a model used by Dr. Frank Whaling in teaching world religions at Edinburgh University. His model notes that religious traditions contain eight common elements--community, ritual, ethics, social involvement, scripture, concept, aesthetics and spirituality. To these eight interlinking elements Dr. Whaling adds two more--firstly, how the tradition understands and mediates transcending reality, and secondly how the individual participant in the tradition responds--making ten elements in all. The book is dedicated to present and future members of St. Mark's Unitarian

Church, Edinburgh. Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. The Hibbert and Speed Trusts have kindly helped with the costs of publication.

*Andrew M. Hill April 1994*

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## **The Unitarian Path in 1 Sentence**

The Unitarian path is a liberal religious movement rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions but open to insights from world faiths, reason and science; and with a spectrum extending from liberal Christianity through to religious humanism.

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## **The Unitarian Path in 1 Paragraph**

The Unitarian path combines personal freedom in religious faith with mutual, interdependent and supportive community. It prefers reflective thinking to rigid believing. Emerging from the Jewish and Christian faiths it is fiercely loyal to Jesus and his teaching, that we should love both God and our neighbours as ourselves. This has brought Unitarians to a grateful recognition that their neighbours may be of other faith or different values, and may draw upon alternate resources of faith and strength. Unitarian religion is more earthy and practical than heavenly and passive. It maintains an ongoing conversation of mind and body defining, refining and incarnating those qualities of life, growth and love which make for a better world.

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## **The Unitarian Path in 1 Chapter**

### **founders**

The question is sometimes asked 'Who founded the Unitarian path?'

**The best answer is 'the Unitarian path is refounded every time someone new travels it.'**

**But there are other possible answers. Some seeking to trace the Unitarian path back to its sources have even suggested:**

- **Pharaoh Akenhaton, who attempted to reform ancient Egyptian religion; or**
- **Moses, the key person in the great monotheistic Jewish faith; or even**

- **Jesus, who remained a Jew and never became a Christian.**

**Others have suggested certain forerunners of the Unitarian path during the 15th and 16th centuries who made their mark upon Protestant Christianity:**

- **Michael Servetus, who asked difficult questions about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and whose death by fire at Geneva in 1553 caused a storm of protest; or**
- **Faustus Socinus, an Italian humanist and refugee from the Inquisition, who found hospitality with the Minor Reformed Church in Poland and became their leading thinker; or**
- **Francis David, who was successively bishop of Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and finally Unitarian churches in Transylvania (now north western Romania).**

### **three signposts**

**Over four centuries three signposts have marked the Unitarian path where Servetus, Socinus and David were early travellers.**

**First, a critical approach which appreciates the place of reason, human thought and the right to think for oneself.**

**Secondly, a questioning attitude about certain Christian doctrines. In particular:**

- 1. The notion that God favours some with salvation and condemns others to perdition. The Unitarian path has responded that God's love is available to all and that no one is condemned to perdition.**
- 2. The notion that individual men and women are permanently depraved and totally dependent upon Christ's atonement for their redemption. The Unitarian path has responded that people are basically humane and that human effort is a welcome contribution towards the quality of life.**
- 3. The notion that God is a trinity of co-equal, consubstantial and co-eternal persons. The Unitarian path has responded by indicating God's oneness and God's participation in the whole of creation. From this particular response came the 'Unitarian' name.**

**Thirdly, the right of private judgement and the necessity for personal integrity have been strongly upheld in the face of imposed creeds and confessions of faith.**

### **three tracks**

**These signposts pointed to a wide diversity among those who travel the Unitarian path today.**

**Within this diversity three well trodden tracks are discernible:**

- 1. a Unitarian (i.e. non-Trinitarian) and Liberal Christian track, which values its relationship with the Judeo-Christian highway;**
- 2. a Theistic track, which recognises that beyond the many human expressions of religious faith there is a common creative source to which, in different ways, they all witness;**
- 3. a Humanist track, which centres religious faith in the here and now, and knowable.**

**No one track excludes another. There are many crossover points between them. They are merely representative and illustrative. One Unitarian community may travel mostly on one track, and another one another. Another community may travel several tracks. But in no Unitarian community ought anyone to be excluded because his/her preferred track is a minority choice.**

### **five foundations**

**So what are the common bonds which enable such diverse travellers to travel the same path and share religious community in Unitarian churches? Here are five foundations which all Unitarians would share:**

- 1. Our understanding of the Truth is a continuously growing process by which reality slowly discloses its essential nature in response to human effort.**
- 2. Religious understanding grows best for us under conditions which guarantee freedom of inquiry and freedom of association.**
- 3. Religious values have meaning only when we apply them in our own lives and in the communities where we live, work and play.**

4. The quality of life will only be improved if we share our skills and insights co-operatively with others in interdependent communities (not necessarily churches).
5. 5. Despite all the tragedy and despair there is always new hope and new possibility.

**one objective**

Reduced to one basic objective the Unitarian path is one of freedom to develop our faith, alongside others, but according to our own intellectual insights and emotional needs.

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## **The Unitarian Path in 10 chapters**

### **1 Religious Community**

**background**

The community of people, usually but not always known as Unitarians, emerged from the predominantly Christian religious culture of Europe and European North America.

Christian religious culture is an amalgam of Jewish and Greek religious insights. A Jewish messianic community, which recognised Jesus as the Messiah, opened its doors to Gentiles (non-Jews) and consolidated its faith in a doctrinal form by filtering it through Greek philosophical concepts. Thus arose Christian orthodoxy (right teaching).

As a result of the emergence of Christian orthodoxy formal entrance to the Christian community has, throughout Christian history, usually been by way of confession of faith in the right teaching of the Christian church as expressed in its creeds.

At a later age when the Christian community of western Europe became disrupted by protesters and reformers, an alternate Protestant Christian community arose alongside the existing Catholic Christian community. The Protestant community placed the Bible

centrally and began to examine Christian orthodoxy in the light of the Bible.

Within the new Protestant community two specific trends are interesting.

- One trend, noting that the creeds of Christian orthodoxy are simply human documents, first displaced the creeds with the Bible as the revealed word of God, and secondly recognised that even the Bible was a humanly compiled document and required the rational human mind to discern God's truth within it.
- A second trend chose to set up a series of alternate, radical Protestant communities quite independent of state churches. These communities placed strong emphases upon personal experience and democratic organisation.

Out of these two specific Protestant trends the Unitarian community grew. Often reluctant to establish a separate community of identity, sometimes more deliberately doing so, today's Unitarian communities are autonomous, sovereign congregations organising their own affairs and calling their own ministers with a minimum of denominational superstructure.

### the style of Unitarian communities

What are these Unitarian communities like? Our major historian Earl Morse Wilbur, surveying from North America the three and half centuries since modern Unitarianism emerged in Transylvania (north west Romania) and Poland, wrote that the Unitarian movement was characterised by three principles:

complete mental freedom, unrestricted use of reason, and generous tolerance  
[*A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Harvard, 1945) p.5]

This observation indicates that Unitarian communities are distinguished from other churches more by their style than by their content. The significant point is that no one can be excluded from a Unitarian church on grounds of belief. Belonging by dissent and disbelief is quite in order. One result of this open style of community is that seekers, agnostics and religious rebels often find safe haven in Unitarian churches. In Unitarian churches people are encouraged to find their own level of faith and very often this is a healing experience - simply to be oneself and feel all right about it.

Sometimes people ask 'What does the Unitarian church believe?' but that is not an appropriate question. It is like asking 'What does a family believe?' 'What does a university believe?' Both are inappropriate questions. More appropriate questions would be 'What is a Unitarian church like?' or 'What does a Unitarian church do?'

Unitarian community is based on the human need for people to belong and associate and share. It is 'a Great Conversation about human nature, God, human destiny, and the most desirable way to take the next step in human betterment. [ Kenneth K. Marshall *Journal of the Liberal Ministry* (Fall 1967) ] But the conversation isn't simply vigorous debate about great issues. It may include that, but it also includes the private soul at prayer within the community and something of the older understanding of conversation which involved human relating and interacting. In other words the conversation involves doing things together either for the life of the church community or for the larger community beyond. A Unitarian church exists to improve both heart and mind and to help make us better persons in a better world.

Unitarians expect to remain personally responsible for their faith, which they refine and purify, not in measurement against some creed or scripture, but in Great Conversation, since 'truth is not a personal vision but the best consensus of informed minds'.  
[ Ralph Helverson *Ten Commandments for an Age of Ambiguity* ]

## pluralism

Within the Unitarian community there is a threefold progression:

- stage one is the assertion of the right of private judgement over creeds and confessions of faith;
- stage two is the open tolerance of dissent from the predominant theological consensus;
- stage three is the acceptance of pluralism, that is the open acceptance and co-existence of different theological positions.

National Unitarian communities and individual Unitarian churches vary as to where they are in this progression. Hungarian-speaking Unitarians and Northern Irish ones are predominantly stage one (right of private judgement). Most British Unitarian churches are stage two (open tolerance of dissent) with a few churches verging into stage three (pluralism). North American Unitarians, in their continental organisation,

have adopted stage three (pluralism) into their principles and purposes.

### **three faith communities**

**What communities of faith are represented in this pluralism? The inquirer may find it helpful if three particular faith communities are defined - always remembering of course that in practice these communities are gatherings on a spectrum.**

**The first faith community considers identity with the wider Christian community significant. It accepts ultimate reality as identified in God, and mediated through the life and teachings of Jesus as expressed in the Bible. Sometimes it differs from traditional Christianity only in so far as it sits loosely to creeds and confessions of faith. More often it is non-Trinitarian and hence Unitarian in its understanding of God, distinctly humanitarian in its appreciation of Jesus, and critical in its reading of the Bible. It welcomes the questioning and testing of traditional Christian insights by radical Christians within main-stream Christian communities.**

**A second Unitarian faith community, religious humanism, has responded to the given religious inheritance more radically. Its adherents have felt unable to accommodate their viewpoint within traditional Christian categories. Religious faith is this-worldly, human and earth-centred, and naturalistic. Humankind's proper study is itself - how it understands itself and copes with the difficult task of living in a changing environment. It doesn't set out to deny God's existence but usually finds traditional God-talk, especially when it carries supernatural assumptions, unhelpful.**

**A third Unitarian faith community moves out from Christian theism and universalises it. It recognises that transcendence in one form or another underlies the perception of all faith communities. Jesus was one among many mediators of transcendence upon the human stage, even to the extent that human persons may enjoy their own direct relationship with God without 'mediator or veil'. [ from a prayer by James Martineau ]**

**There are many touching areas and crossover points within these three faith communities. Unitarian Christianity so easily finds common cause with a universalised theism; and a naturalised Christian theism is less problematical for religious humanists. Humanists also find common cause with Christians and theists in values which transcend individual persons, and in appreciating the importance of symbol and myth. All of which brings these three different faith communities to common ground and a shared community.**



## **conclusion**

**A community is a group of people who hold something in common. The Unitarian community shares the common humanity of its members. It is a communion of human seekers and a communion of healing.**

**Wendell Berry wrote:**

**We hurt, and are hurt,  
and have each other for healing  
It is healing. It is never whole.  
[ 'Marriage' *Collected Poems* (1985) pp.70-71 ]**

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## **2. Ritual and forms of worship**

### **a dual backcloth**

**Unitarian rites and ceremonies emerged before a dual backcloth.**

- **The first backcloth was Reformed Protestant Christianity which restored the place of the Bible and the written word of God to a place in Christian worship alongside the sacraments.**
- **The second backcloth overlaps the first. In restoring the Bible to Christian worship Reformed Protestant Christians rejected most of the ritual of the Catholic church. They wanted to restore the original purity of Christian practice. In Britain and North America these people were called Puritans.**

**This dual backcloth is easily seen in the architecture of older Unitarian meeting houses and church buildings. The pulpit is central, placed there for reading and proclaiming the word of God in scripture, and the walls and building lines are clean, plain and uncluttered. Windows are rectangular and clear glazed. The Puritan meeting houses of Old and New England are often beautifully austere.**

## **the foreground**

**Today hearing the word read, whether from the Bible or from other scripture or literature, and listening to a sermon still constitute the major part of Unitarian worship, together with prayers or meditations and the singing of hymns. The rejection of the complex rituals and doctrines of other churches, especially by those joining the Unitarian path from such traditions, can be as strong today as in days long ago. For many new Unitarians talking about their religious faith, sifting it and purifying it in discussion is an act of worship in itself. Unitarians today are still very verbal and puritan people.**

**On the other hand Unitarian worship often responds at a tangent to these deep seated verbal and puritan trends.**

- **Unitarians may be very verbal but short periods of silence are usually found in Unitarian worship.**
- **Unitarians may be uncomfortable with complex rituals but they do prefer, that in worship 'all things be done decently and in order' [ *Corinthians 14:40* ]**
- **Unitarians may talk informally a great deal about their faith, but they prefer preaching which is prepared rather than left to the moment, and prayers and meditations which are considered rather than spontaneous.**

**In some churches, but not most, in the desire for consideration, preparation and 'all things done decently and in order', they use a printed liturgy. These books usually contain a series of services for use in turn and provide for more congregational participation in worship. Starting in the late eighteenth century this Unitarian way in worship began by making Unitarian adaptations of the Anglican liturgy. One such included material from all the world's religions. But such liturgies are less frequently used than they used to be.**

**On the other hand there is a great deal of printed 'worship material' which is in circulation and in use by those who lead Unitarian worship. Especially prolific in this area have been the theistic and humanist communities of the Unitarian path.**

- **Unitarians may at times be thoroughly pragmatic and economic about their places of worship but time and experience have shown them that the atmosphere of the worship environment is important also.**

**These environments may be built almost from scratch in a hired room using words and music and silence and body language, or carefully crafted within an ancient and hallowed place, or more heavily imposed by a specific architecture. Victorian and nineteenth century Unitarians followed the age and built many gothic style Unitarian churches with pointed arches and chancels, stained glass and communion tables which looked like altars. Some even had' spires. They built atmosphere with a vengeance.**

### **trends and tangents**

**Today Unitarian worship displays these trends and tangents in abundance. Which trend or tangent is most in evidence depends upon the place, story and theology of the particular Unitarian community:**

- **Unitarian worship may be more or less formal.**
- **It may be in sparse room or ornate church.**
- **It may be led by a minister or a lay preacher or an ad hoc group.**
- **It may use much symbol or be sparse of it.**
- **It may be distinctly Christian or theist or religiously humanist or carry shades of all three.**

**Unitarian worship evolves and adapts, sometimes drastically and frequently and sometimes so slowly you would hardly notice. But always there is change because above all Unitarian worship follows the principle of continuous revision.**

### **the worth of human lives**

**Nowhere, perhaps, is continuous revision more likely to be seen than in those Unitarian rituals which honour the worth and value of human lives. The most common are ceremonies at times of marriage, birth, and death. There is a point of view which says that in these events all persons are equal and therefore the same rituals are appropriate for all. For some this may be so, but that is not the Unitarian way of doing things. The Unitarian path prefers to personalise these landmark events of life.**

**Unitarians actually take very seriously the old Catholic teaching that at a wedding the real priests of the ceremony are the bride and groom, not the celebrant. Some couples may create their whole wedding ceremony themselves. Others may choose suitable words and promises from collections of material which Unitarian ministers keep on file.**

**In other cases, having spent some time with the couple, a minister may put together a wedding ceremony personalised to them. Some Unitarian weddings may be very traditional. Others are far from traditional. What is important is that both bride and groom have the sort of wedding which celebrates their hopes, experiences and values.**

**When a child is born there is a deep sense of thankfulness and joy by the parents, a desire to celebrate their child's birth, and an inner need to dedicate themselves to the task of parenting. This too can be expressed in Unitarian ritual. For Unitarian Christian parents infant baptism may mark the reception of their child into the Christian family. Others understand the water of baptism as symbolising the whole community of all earthly life since without water life cannot exist. Others prefer ceremonies altogether without water. Unitarian ministers are happy to meet the parents' preference.**

**The long term planning which usually goes into a wedding or into celebrating a birth is usually not possible for a funeral but the same principle of a personalised event applies. Some Unitarians may have discussed their funerals with their minister, or left instructions. Unitarian ministers always do their best to honour these requests. At other times ministers will rely upon their own knowledge of the deceased person to help them put together an appropriate funeral. When ministers have not known the deceased person they seek out relevant information. Unitarian ministers are often happy to officiate at so called "on-religious funerals". No two Unitarian funerals are ever the same.**

**Unitarian ministers may well be willing to help at other life events. Blessing a same-sex couple is one such, or separation rites for parting couples.**

**In a depersonalised world these very personalised services are increasingly appreciated. The principle of continuous revision in ritual and worship meets the needs of the age.**

### **a careful balance**

**In a changing world people reach for the familiar and the known to provide them with stability and reassurance. But they also reach for the less familiar and the not so well known because in a changing world people need to be part of the new age. Good worship and ritual is a careful balance of the two. Unitarian ritual and worship tries to do just that.**

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### 3 Ethics

This chapter of *The Unitarian Path* is all about ethics. It is in three sections and in each section there are three subsections.

#### three things the same

1. The first section says the same thing in three different ways.

- Firstly, throughout human history there has been an inbuilt tension between religious beliefs and the application of those beliefs in action. Sometimes the emphasis has been upon belief and sometimes upon action. When the balance has been weighted too much one way movements have emerged to adjust the balance. Unitarians have traditionally favoured the action side of this balance. They responded warmly to the late Dag Hammarskjöld who wrote in his diary *Markings*:

In our era, the road to holiness necessarily  
passes through the world of action.  
[ English translation (Faber and Faber) 1964 p.108 ]

This Unitarian emphasis has sometimes been expressed in the simple rhyming phrase 'deeds before creeds'.

- Secondly, the tension between deeds and creeds appeared in the New Testament as one between faith and works. Paul writes to the Christian church at Rome:

The righteousness of God has been disclosed ...  
through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe ...  
We hold that a person is justified by faith.  
[ *Romans* 3:21-2,28 ]

But elsewhere another New Testament writer protests:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Co in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by

itself, if it has no works, is dead. [ *James 2:14-17* ]

Even Paul softens his tone when he writes to Corinth:

Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.  
[ *Corinthians 13:13* ]

So beside the phrase 'deeds before creed' the Unitarian lines up the phrase 'love before faith'.

- Thirdly, the preferred Unitarian emphasis of deeds and love over creeds and faith may be expressed using two Greek based words orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Ortho means right, doxy means teaching and praxis means practice. So orthodoxy and orthopraxis are 'right teaching' and 'right practice'. Sometimes the Unitarian path has been described as heterodox implying that its teachings were other than orthodox, but the Unitarian preference for deeds and love suggests a more apt contrast with orthodoxy is orthopraxis - right practice. Unitarians hold that right practice, right actions, right behaviour - good works are more significant than right believing and correct faith. After all, points out the Unitarian, Jesus told us:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. [ *Matthew 7:21* ]

So we have three snappy phrases which encapsulate the Unitarian preference that ethical religion takes priority over doctrinal religion:

- deeds before creeds;
- love before faith;
- orthopraxis before orthodoxy.

**three similar things**

2. This second section says three not quite the same things about ethics along the Unitarian path.

- **Another tension within the life of human communities is between codified rules of behaviour and conduct, and intuitive awareness of what is right and wrong, which manages well enough without the rule book, and which recognises occasions when what the rule book says is right is actually immoral. Some people hold that the moral rule book should be followed under all circumstances lest the structures of society be undermined. Unitarians do not belong among these people. They have a long tradition of risking the priority of morality over moralism.**
- **The same tension exists between some who claim that rules are rules and consequently unalterable and others who recognise that rules are the present expression of certain ethical principles such as limiting suffering, honouring life and easing social interaction. From this latter perspective moral rules are in a dynamic and changing flow modified from time to time as circumstances change. This is the perspective of Unitarians who not only give morality priority over moralism, but also give principles priority over rules and are prepared to revise them when necessary.**
- **Finally the same tension emerges yet another way. Some people presented with circumstances requiring an ethical decision examine the precedents as codified in social custom, state law and court decisions. However no set of circumstances is ever repeated twice and the identifiit from precedent is never exact. Others prefer to start right there in the situation and ask not 'what does the law say I should do?' but 'what is the most loving thing I ought to do in these circumstances?' Unitarians would normally be found within this latter group preferring love to legalism.**

**So we have a second trio of phrases which indicate the direction of the Unitarian path in ethics:**

- **morality rather than moralism;**
- **principles rather than rules;**
- **love rather than legalism.**

**three different things**

**3. About Unitarian ethics we can also say three other things--this time all different:**

- **The first is that whatever ethical perspective emerges from the religious faith of Unitarians it belongs not just in the religious sphere but to the whole of our lives. Nevertheless, when there is no agreed consensus, Unitarians will not impose their ethical perspective upon those who choose another. Indeed, they readily recognise that a great deal of moral decision making has less to do with reaching out for black and white answers to moral dilemmas, and more to do with fishing around for common understanding in murky pools. Unitarians will generally be found fishing painfully around in the murk rather than reaching for readily available black and white responses.**
- **The second other thing is that for the Unitarian path ethics is both a private and a public matter. Morality is about the ethics of the market place, the stock exchange and the battle field as well as about such personal matters as individual conduct and sexuality. The human person is both an individual and a social being and Unitarians will not be found among those who say that churches and religious institutions should keep out of public affairs and matters of government and stick to upholding so-called traditional family values.**
- **Thirdly, Unitarian ethics is distinctly this-worldly. Many Unitarians are, at most, agnostic about another world anyway, and even the more convinced are usually still 'one-life-at-a-timers'. Someone once quipped 'Unitarians believe in life before death' and there is good sense in that. So Unitarians neither choose to opt out of moral responsibility in the here and now, nor choose to store up treasures in heaven. They remember the words of an ancient prayer which invokes the rule of God 'on earth'.**

**A third group of phrases, then, which summarises the Unitarian path in ethics is:**

- **ethics is about the whole of our lives;**
- **ethics is about both private and public spheres;**
- **ethics is about this world.**

**a tenth thing**

**Three times three makes nine. So finally here is a tenth!**



When Jesus was asked about the commandments he referred, of course, to just two--the one about loving God and the other about loving one's neighbour as one loves oneself. About Jesus's reply Unitarians have been heard to say that were they actually obliged to choose between God and their neighbour they ought to choose their neighbour. Well, if that is so, so be it for that is the Unitarian path.

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## 4 Social and Political Involvement

### factors

Three significant factors have shaped the Unitarian approach to social and political concern.

- Firstly, the Unitarian path has been shaped by the intense social and political criticism of the ancient Hebrew prophetic tradition as it has reached us through the Judeo-Christian heritage:

because you trample on the poor  
and take from them levies of grain,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not live in them...

warned Amos and then exhorted:

let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. [ *Amos 5:11,24* ]

Rather more gently and five to six hundred years later, Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers  
for they will be called children of God [ *Matthew 5:9* ]

Social and political criticism is important along the Unitarian path.

- Secondly, the Unitarian path has been shaped by its background of Reformed Protestant Christianity with its concern for both the religious and secular life of

**the nation. Wrote Elizabeth Blackwell, the first registered woman doctor on both sides of the Atlantic, and a Unitarian:**

**It is only when we have learned to recognise that God's law for the human body is as sacred as, - nay is one with God's law for the human soul, that we shall begin to understand the religion of health. [ *The Religion of Health* ]**

**A popular saying is 'Cleanliness is next to godliness'. For Unitarians cleanliness- personal, mental and public health, the health of the social community and the health of the body politic have always been associated with their religious faith.**

- **Thirdly, the Unitarian path has been shaped by the Unitarian experience as a minority tradition. The Unitarian story has, at times, involved suffering, persecution and calumny in both religious and civil fields such that for Unitarians religious and civil liberty are one and indivisible. Having, for example, finally achieved their own civil liberties in 1813, it was Unitarian MPs like William Smith (the grandfather of the nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale) who led the movement which in 1828 produced the Catholic Emancipation Act. In the previous century British Unitarians sided first with American colonists in their revolution and then only a few years later found themselves in sympathy with the revolutionaries in France. One such, Thomas Fyshe Palmer was sentenced by a Scottish assize court for sedition and deported to Australia.**

**These three factors, then, have shaped the Unitarian involvement in social and political concerns:**

- **the prophetic tradition of the Judaic-Christian heritage;**
- **reformed Christianity's concern for the social and public well-being of the whole society;**
- **the minority experience.**

### **parameters**

**On the basis of these three factors we can define a number of parameters within which Unitarian social and political concern is likely to function. Generally speaking and allowing for exceptions, we can say that Unitarians are:**

- **this-worldly more than other-worldly in their concerns;**

- interested in salvation here and now more than hereafter;
- against the point of view which says 'keep politics out of religion';
- as concerned for social and community welfare as they are for that of the family and the individual;
- advocates of participatory structures replacing hierarchical ones in all areas of society;
- upholders of minority rights in the face of all tyrannies;
- and in a broad, non-political party sense, more comfortable under the heading liberal than under the heading 'conservative'. More Unitarians probably read The Guardian than The Daily Telegraph.

**There is a phrase in the Koran which would suit many Unitarians and which puts all this in a nutshell:**

**one hour of justice is worth seventy hours of prayer**

### **issues**

**So how does such a philosophy work out in practice? Let us take up some issues. Many Unitarians, past and present have been supporters of:**

- good education available for all at all levels--pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary and 'third age';
- the development and renewal of democratic institutions at all levels of society;
- health care for all, available free at the point of service;
- fair and adequate welfare provision for the retired, the unemployed, the low-paid and the sick;
- employment rights which enhance the dignity of workers;
- a fairer and more equal role for women, ethnic minorities and national communities;
- human rights, fertility rights, gay rights, voluntary euthanasia rights and anti-death penalty;
- green philosophy as a long term and in-depth ingredient of social and political concern;
- creative international relationships and global institutions such as the United Nations;
- initiatives for peace and disarmament and the redistribution of resources in socially responsible ways;
- programmes for emergency aid and famine relief, voluntary agencies and government policies of 'third world' development.

**Unitarians do not always agree on which political party they back to further these objectives but they endeavour to avoid destructive tendencies which set party off against party and where sight is lost of the overall objective that:**

**to trample on a human being, of whatever colour, clime, rank, or condition is to trample on God's child.  
[ William Ellery Channing *The Church* (1841) ]**

**and that:**

**individually we are members one of one another.  
[ *Romans* 12:5 ]**

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## **5 Scripture and Myth**

**five parts**

**This chapter about the Unitarian understanding of scripture, myth and sacred text has five parts:**

- 1. Unitarians and the Jewish-Christian Bible**
- 2. Unitarians and the scriptures of other faith traditions**
- 3. Unitarians and the critical tradition**
- 4. Unitarians and mythology**
- 5. Unitarians and autobiography**

## **Unitarians and the Jewish-Christian Bible**

**Firstly, the Unitarian path in religion was founded on scripture.**

**Convince us that any tenet is authorised by the Bible, from that moment we receive it... no power on earth shall wrest it from us.[ Charles Wellbeloved (1823) ]**

**Charles Wellbeloved in 1823 was simply summing up three hundred years of Unitarian loyalty to the Protestant Christian tradition which held that:**

**the Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants.  
[ William Chillingworth (1602-44) *The Religion of Protestants* ]**

**But thirteen years later, 1836, James Martineau articulated an important qualification, specifically characteristic of the Unitarian path:**

**that reason is the ultimate appeal, the supreme tribunal, to the test of which even Scripture must be brought.  
[ *The Rationale of Religious Inquiry* (1836) p.119 ]**

**What is unreasonable in the Bible is incredible and unbelievable. Martineau expressed a view which at the time was not readily accepted, but which eventually came to be one of the basic principles of the Unitarian path in religion - the primacy of reason.**

## **Unitarians and the scriptures of other faith traditions**

**Secondly, the Unitarian path in religion is open and tolerant of other faith traditions. This means that such sacred scriptures as Buddhist Suttas, the Hindu Vedas and Bhagavad Gita, the Muslim Koran, and Chinese scriptures are regarded with similar reverence to the Bible, even if for practical and cultural reasons attention to them may be more sparing than to the Bible.**

This openness to the scriptures of other faiths has long been part of the Unitarian path in religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for example, founders of American literature and Unitarians, studied these other Scriptures as they became available to a western and European public, and spoke and wrote of them with appreciation. Their appreciation was reflected at 'official' level a generation later. John Page Hopps, Unitarian minister in Glasgow in the 1870s published a slim volume called *Readings for Public Worship and the Home* which included passages from the Koran and the Roman pagan Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The current hymnbook in use by Unitarian Universalist churches in North America, in its section of responsive readings includes passages from the Bhagavad Gita, from Buddhist and Chinese scriptures as well as from the Bible and other writers ancient and modern.

Not surprisingly. Unitarians will sometimes speak of 'The Bible of the World' and of continuing revelation.

## Unitarians and the critical tradition

Thirdly, Unitarians approach all scriptures critically. That is they recognise:

- that sacred texts should be collected against their earliest known sources;
- that the social, cultural and religious context in which the sacred texts were written has to be taken into account; and
- that the social, cultural and religious context in which they are now being read and studied has also to be understood.

So it was that Erasmus's sixteenth century discovery that a trinitarian proof text in the Bible was spurious was a great spur to Unitarian speculation. The spurious text was in the first epistle of John:

- There are three that bear record in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost and these three are one. [ a *John 5:7 AV* ]

From early on Unitarians were discovering the inadequacies in translation of the English Authorised Version of the Bible and making their own translations of many parts using more adequate sources. There was even 'Unitarian Bible' called *The New*

*Testament in an Improved Version* (1808). Unitarians were also rearranging the Bible:

- United States President Thomas Jefferson, who rather unwisely predicted that everyone would be a Unitarian in a generation, produced his own rearranged version of the Gospels.
- British Unitarians welcomed and published *The Precepts of Jesus* (1824) arranged from the Gospels by the Hindu Brahmin reformer Rammohun Roy.
- More recently *The Golden Treasury of the Bible* (1934) a helpful selection and rearrangement of the Bible undertaken by British Unitarian scholars was in wide use.

Unitarians welcomed textual and higher criticism from the start. They outrightly reject scriptural fundamentalism and verbal inspiration, not just of the Bible, but of all scriptures sacred and secular.

## Unitarians and mythology

Fourthly, Unitarians now have a heightened understanding of the place of myth and story in sacred scripture. They realise that sacred scripture is rarely factual history, ought not be treated as such, and that more often than not the stories and precepts of scripture have been told and written with

- to explain a people's history;
- to record the teachings of a mediator or saviour;
- to show a path of salvation;
- to explain the ways of God.

How did the world begin? Where and when and how was the saviour born? The stories emerge in response to common human need and questioning. They express eternal truths found to be of help to both individuals and nations coping with the problem of living. They help us relate to things as they are. They bind communities together. They give depth to our history.

That many of these ancient myths still speak to us is quite clear. The work of craft workers, artists, musicians, poets and writers all bear witness to the ongoing life of the Biblical stories of creation and nativity.

Unitarians, released from a literal understanding of scripture and from the need to regard it as a rule of faith, are therefore able to appreciate scripture for its myths and stories. They recognise that scripture doesn't so much speak factual truth, as speak through its stories to the truth that is already written within us.

## Unitarians and autobiography

So finally and fifthly, what about Unitarians and autobiography? The Unitarian path tries to bring out and help people express the faith which they already have. It tries not to impose a faith upon them. We each have our own stories of birth and life:

- where we are from?
- who our parents were and how we grew up and apart from them?
- what other people, groups and institutions have affected us?

These are elements of our own personal stories. We cannot escape from any of them, even if sometimes we may fancy doing so. Indeed, experience seems to show that the most integrated people are those who face squarely the whole of their life, the bad parts as well as the good. Doing so is an essay in autobiography, an exercise in writing our probably as yet unwritten personal scripture.

So scripture on the Unitarian path possesses a significant characteristic. It is ongoing. It is never a final and complete revelation. The Word is revealed every time we share in conversation, however hesitatingly, something of ourselves with another human person.

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## 6 God and the Human Person

### a two way dialogue

The Unitarian path engages in a two way dialogue of recovery and discovery:

- first, with earlier ages concerning insights which have been forgotten;and



- secondly, with the scientific community concerning new truths about how things may be.

Unitarian understanding of the concepts of God and the human person continue within this dialogue.

## New Testament insights

In the formative period during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Unitarians were anxious to recover New Testament insights about God and the human person which they thought were being ignored.

- Jesus, quoting Jewish scripture, said 'The first [commandment] is...The Lord our God, the Lord is one'. [ *Mark 12:29* ] Why then all this talk of God in three persons?
- The writer of the first letter of John wrote 'God is love'. [ *John 4:8and16* ] Why all this talk, then, about God condemning many people to hell?
- Paul told the church at Corinth 'You are God's temple and...God's Spirit dwells in you' [ *Corinthians 3:16* ] Why all this talk about the human person being depraved and corrupt?

Thus upon the two most significant points of reference for any religious faith, God and the human person, the early Unitarians took alternative points of view to that of the prevailing Christian orthodoxy. Indeed it was Christian orthodoxy in south-eastern Europe which, responding to the protest that God is one not three, first dubbed these religious rebels with the name 'Unitarian'.

In northern Europe, in Britain and North America, early Unitarians were more concerned about keeping faith with scriptural language and with a rational understanding of scriptural truths. They did not encourage a head on collision with Trinitarian Christianity. Only with reluctance did they accept the Unitarian name. Their chief concern was that the human person was someone of dignity and worth, generally speaking more good than evil and blessed with a capacity to choose a better way. The most eloquent spokesperson for this stream of the Unitarian path was the American William Ellery Channing who spoke of:

the godlike capacities of human nature

and said:

**I cannot but pity [those] who recognise nothing god-like in [their] own nature. [ *Likeness to God* (1828) ]**

**So it comes about that along the Unitarian path talk about God and talk about the god-like capacity within human nature are often difficult to distinguish from each other.**

### **religious humanism**

**one outspoken group of Unitarians, struggling bravely with the impact of modern science upon religious thought and with the emergence of evolution as a most successful model of how life on earth came to be as it is, appeared to dismiss God altogether as a relic of a pre-scientific age. The group claimed:**

- **that the universe is self-existing and not created;**
- **that the human person is part of nature and has emerged as a result of a continuous process;**
- **that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values;**
- **that religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. [ *The Humanist Manifesto* (1933) ]**

**These Unitarians, describing themselves as religious humanists, were brave wayfarers, and if perhaps they didn't in the end quite replace God with godlike humanity-- Auschwitz and the Gulag and the Nuclear Bomb saw to that--they did leave awkward and difficult questions which needed asking then and very often still need asking now.**

- **How can one speak of an almighty and loving God when half the time not only the human race but also the natural order seem to run in the opposite direction; and of an all-knowing God when evolutionary theory, relativity and quantum**

mechanics seem to know rather more?

Such questions are still asked and many books have been written with attempted answers.

where is your God?

These 'no God' Unitarians posed another set of questions:

- Is it possible to speak the language of faith when its words and concepts carry the assumptions of a different age which thought the universe was three layered and the earth flat?

It happens that along the Unitarian path there is another stream, recovered from an ancient spring, which asks different and, maybe, better questions about God and thereby circumvents the problem of the omnipotent creator of-everything-out-of-nothing. 'Where is your God?' it asks and three Unitarians have answered.

- James Martineau, last century, replied 'Every man's highest, nameless though it be, is his living God'. [ *Endeavours after the Christian Life II* pp.252-3 ]
- In this century James Luther Adams responded 'We must not believe every 'pious' man's religion to be what he says it is... he may actually give his deepest loyalty to something quite different ... Find out what that is and you have found his religion. You have found his god.' 'A faith for free men' in S. H. Fritchman *Together we Advance* (1946) p.50
- Much more recently F. Forrester Church has written 'God is not God's name. God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, spirit of life, ground of being, these too are names for the unnameable which I am now content to call my God.' [ *Born-Again Unitarian Universalism* (1983) p. 91 ]

holism

Some may find this answer to the ancient question 'Where is your God?' attractive.

Among the quests of modern physics has been that for the fundamental particle. Find the cosmic stardust and one of the riddles of the universe may be solved. The human

person will have found the mind of God, creator of heaven and earth out of nothing. Maybe - but there always seems to be still yet another fundamental particle to find. So far we have quarks and gluons.

But there is an alternate scenario which holds that there are no such things as fundamental particles from which everything is created. Instead everything is made from everything else. The world has pulled itself up into existence, as it were, by its own bootstraps. It's called bootstrap theory'.

Bootstrap theory indicates that everything exists by dint of everything else and that everything and everyone is interdependent--all things and all creatures related to one another in a great web of existence. Every part is dependent upon the whole and the whole upon its parts.

One way we talk of such insights is to call them 'holistic'. But another and much older way of valuing the interdependence of whole and parts is to talk of God. With such an understanding many Unitarians happily speak of God today.

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## 7 Aesthetics and Arts

### three earths

Aesthetics is 'the principles of taste and art.' [ Chambers English Dictionary ] So where are Unitarian principles of taste and art rooted? They are rooted in three different earths.

- The first earth in which Unitarian principles of taste and art are rooted is that remarkable flowering of art, culture and intellect which, bursting into life among the merchant principalities of Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, spread its effects wide. It is today known as the Renaissance--since it was a rebirth of the creative human spirit after the stifling dogmatism of the Dark Ages. Among its famous names are Petrarch and Michael Angelo and Leonardo Da Vinci.

- **The second earth in which Unitarian principles of taste and art are rooted is the sixteenth and seventeenth century movement for reformation in culture called Puritanism. It often went hand in hand with Reformed Protestant Christianity's response to the richly and ornately disguised authoritarianism of the medieval Catholic Church and especially with those in the English speaking world who were anxious to take the Reformation beyond Episcopalianism. Among its most famous names was the poet John Milton.**
- **The third earth in which Unitarian principles of taste and art are rooted is that movement of the human spirit during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which, struggling with the implications of modern science, signalled the transition to the modern world. We now know it as the Enlightenment. Sometimes resisted by the churches and sometimes welcomed, among its famous names were Voltaire and the atheist philosopher David Hume. The Encyclopaedia Britannica is a child of the Enlightenment.**

### **the human trees**

**Not surprisingly the human trees which grow in these three different earths are complex in their identity. Historically speaking, within the English speaking world Unitarian churches are deeply rooted in Puritan earth. The seventeenth and eighteenth century meeting houses of many Unitarian congregations in Britain and New England are characterised by a puritan simplicity of straight lines, clear glass and white walls.**

**The psalm singing Puritan offspring who built and worshipped in such places were of a type, however, who were not averse to sporting a lace collar upon their plain clothing.**

- **They were entrepreneurs and merchants ready to add some carving graces to the wood and stone work of their Puritan meeting houses.**
- **They were manufacturers, living above subsistence level, and sending their sons, and before most people also their daughters, to places of higher education where they met a wider world and enlightened learning. They expected the same too of their preachers.**
- **They were outsiders making their way in the world, striving for recognition and respectability, even prepared to ape the establishment, when necessary taking on fashion and building and acting accordingly.**

**Their spokesperson came along in 1840 when James Martineau, Unitarian thinker, preacher and educator and scion of their octagonal and decorated meeting house at**

Norwich, wrote in the preface of a hymn book he had compiled:

**It is evident that the natural sentiments of worship have been parents of all that is great in sacred art; and that architecture, music, painting, and poetry, first allied themselves with religion, - not condescendingly, in order to improve it, - but reverently, to receive from it their noblest consecration. [ *Hymns for the Christian Church and Home* (1840) ]**

Martineau there clearly gives the lie that a Puritan heritage is by definition one of cultural philistinism.

**seven principles**

So what might be some Unitarian principles of taste and art? Here are seven:

- A first Unitarian principle of taste and art might be that of the expanding word - rooted in the Word of God, written in and received from Scripture - the Word moves on and speaks on other pages and through other mediums both sacred and secular--in poetry and art, music, sculpture, architecture and dance. The Word is visual, structure, movement, harmony, dance, colour, light and dark, hard and soft, pliable, rhyme, measure - all these things and more.
- A second Unitarian principle of taste and art might be that it is flexible and developmental with an internal dynamism--not fixed and unchanging according to some preset and non-variable canons such as Stalin put out for Soviet citizens to follow. Art welcomes change as part of how things are - the natural growth of novelty and initiative. 'Art nouveau' and 'the shock of the new' confront and challenge our inherited perceptions, feeding and renewing them, and sparing us from cultural and religious impoverishment.
- A third Unitarian principle of taste and art is summed up in the Pauline and Biblical phrase 'all things should be done decently and in order' [ *Corinthians* 14:40 ] - not grotesquely and not excessively but with respect for the underlying flow of how things are. It is a median way between destructive storm and stagnant calm, the eight-fold middle path of the Buddha, and the Benedictine rule of moderation.
- A fourth Unitarian principle of taste and art is that it should be honest and truthful to the medium in which it works. How often we can be deceived into thinking that something is 'so real' when on closer inspection it turns out to be a clever lie. Some artificial flowers enter this category. But 'tell it how it is'. Be honest. Tell the truth and let stone be stone and wood wood, like the Pompidou Centre in Paris where drain pipes and heating vents run in magnificent riot around the building without any attempt at disguise.
- A fifth Unitarian principle of taste and culture is that an artistic creation should be of fair and crafted quality, the careful work of hands, heart and mind in setting notes to score and paint to canvas, and not the mass produced and

cheaply tawdry creations of sweated labour. A work of art is an offering to the sources of inspiration. Bach knew this when he wrote his Musical Offering and wrote the Latin initials AMDG (Ad Majoram Dei Gloria--To the Greater Glory of God) above the score. Only the very best will do!

- A sixth Unitarian principle of taste and culture is that simplicity is preferred to complexity. We are in the succession of those who preferred the simple name of the one God to the complexities of Trinitarian faith. Great art is often a few strokes and great music a few notes. But simplicity which avoids dullness is, of course, a very difficult quality to achieve and often requires a Picasso or a Beethoven.
- A seventh Unitarian principle of taste and culture is that a work of art ought to be an imaginative work, not a simple copy. It should also expand the viewer-listener-reader's imagination since artist and recipient are both made in the image of God'.

### **three creative artists rooted in Unitarian earth**

These seven principles--the expanding word, flexibility, decency and orderliness, honesty, quality, simplicity and imagination--may not be

specifically or exclusively Unitarian, since many other faith traditions are rooted in the same three earths, but they would seem to be found in:

- the haunting rhythms and melodies of a Bartok orchestral score
- the simple loftiness of a Frank Lloyd Wright church building
- the careful phrasing and syntax of an e.e.cummings sonnet

**i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirit of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes**

**(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)**

**how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any--lifted from the no  
of all nothing--human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?**

**(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)  
[ Copyright permission applied for ]**

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## 8 Spirituality

### defining spirituality

There is an immediate definition problem about 'spirituality' which is both a portmanteau word and a fashionable word. So I am resorting to the dictionaries and etymology which refer to spirituality as either the quality, or the condition, or the state of being spiritual. Spiritual has to do with spirit which, in the Biblical mind frame from which the Unitarian path emerged, originally meant wind or breath.

- A wind from God swept over the face of the waters [ *Genesis 1:2* ]
- The Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life [ *Genesis 2:7* ]

This Biblical resistance to the possibility of a separate spirit world immediately earthed the spiritual into the world as it is, and that seems to be a good place from which to outline an understanding of spirituality along the Unitarian path.

### sevenfold and earthy

Unitarian spirituality is of the earth earthy. It is sevenfold:

1. personal and direct in its experience
2. tuned to thanks and praise
3. concerned with wholeness
4. reflective
5. tidal
6. communal as well as private
7. active more than passive

1. Unitarian spirituality is personal and direct in its experience. Sometimes charged with being cold and rational and intellectual, better informed friends have discerned a



quietly deep mystical strain beneath the Unitarian path.

- Its early pioneers Servetus and Socinus, noted an historian, Alexander Gordon, brushed aside the Trinitarian dogma in their haste to get at Christ. [ *Theological Review* 61 (April 1878) pp.291-2 ]
- 'Acquaint men [and women] at first hand with deity' extolled the essayist and one time Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson. [ *The Divinity School Address* (1838) ]
- Other Unitarians have spoken of enjoying an original relationship with the universe'.

No mediatorial channel or activity is necessary along the Unitarian path for individuals to come to an understanding relationship with the things around them. They can enjoy the world directly and through personal experience.

2. Unitarian spirituality is tuned to thanks and praise and transformation, not to guilt, sin and repentance. Cosmic glory means more than human fall. Death is natural and not the wages of any sin. The human body is for celebration rather than mortification. The Unitarian will find common mind with the Catholic Matthew Fox, who in rejecting fall/redemption theology with its injunction to 'keep the soul clean' adopts a creation centred theology which says:

make soul wet so that it grows [ *Original Blessing* (1983) p.316 ]

3. Unitarian spirituality is especially concerned with wholeness--personal wholeness, community wholeness and global wholeness. The purpose of devotional activity is to overcome human partiality and to seek healing for the divisions within ourselves, between ourselves, others and our environment, between ourselves and the resources of strength and forgiveness which are available to us. We are called upon to kneel in one another's sanctuaries. For us Unitarians 'wholeness' and holiness' are interchangeable words. That which is whole is holy.

4. Unitarian spirituality is reflective. Unitarians are a thoughtful and thinking people rather than a believing one. We are seekers more than arrivers. Our mind set is discursive rather more than pre-set. We rush from the ordained and the repetitious and prayers-by-rote for that which is careful and prepared and reflective.

- From words without meaning, from empty forms, from semblance and pretence, from all that is imposed by habit and endorsed by custom, and from shallowness of every kind, unfetter and deliver us. [ A. Powell Davies *The Language of the Heart* (1969) P. 43 ]

are the words of a prayer by a Unitarian minister. Sometimes our reflection can actually be argumentative and that's in an age old tradition. 'God of my disbelief...' begins an old Jewish prayer. Devout Unitarians have that struggle too and are neither afraid nor ashamed of it.

#### 5. Unitarian spirituality is tidal. It recognises what James Martineau referred to as *The Tides of the Spirit*

- In the occasionalism of piety [he wrote] I see not its shame, but its distinct glory; and would lay stress on the intermittency of the devout affections, as the sign, not of poverty or weakness, but specifically of their grandeur in themselves...For, whether you stay at home, and look in upon the composition of our own nature; or go out into the universe and providence of God, you will find this law: that, of [God's] agencies and manifestations, it is the lowest that are least mutable, and must remain the same from first to last; whilst the highest have ever tidal ebb and flow-moving in waves of time, and surprising hidden inlets of space with their flood. [ *Hours of Thought* (1888) p.8 ]

Unitarians are able to appreciate that not everyone feels or ought to feel spiritual at every moment and season of their lives. For some that realisation can be the lifting of a heavy burden.

6. Unitarian spirituality is communal as well as private. That doesn't mean it is a matter of standing praying at street corners. But then neither is it just a matter of going into your own room and shutting the door as Jesus seemed to advise. [ *Matthew* 6:5-6 ] It is a matter of sharing with others in prayerful interchange so that a common mind may emerge. Among Unitarians, praying together involves listening to one another in a non-judgmental and non-contradictory way. Praying and creative conversation are not vastly different. Since life, for us, is both private and communal, so too is the spiritual life both private and communal.

7. Unitarian spirituality is active as well as passive.

- 'all honest work is prayer' said a Unitarian sage;
- 'prayer doesn't change things, prayer changes people and people change things' said another;
- 'I say my prayers when it's calm and when it's rough I tend my ship' is the sort of spirituality to which a Unitarian will respond 'Amen'.

**Spirituality, devotion, prayer, meditation - call it what you will, it is worth little if it remains a purely privatised, non-activated, self-centred pursuit of holiness. Spirituality, to be genuine, is about en-spiriting our own lives so that we may be better guests of the global and cosmic hospitality we share.**

**a summary**

**So we may say that Unitarian spirituality is of the cosmos cosmic, of the globe global and of the earth earthy. It is sevenfold:**

1. **it is personal and direct in its experience and not mediated through intermediate channels;**
2. **it is tuned to thanks and praise and not to guilt and sin;**
3. **it is concerned with wholeness and not with partiality;**
4. **it is reflective and not formalised;**
5. **it is tidal and not constant;**
6. **it is communal as well as private;**
7. **it is active as well as passive.**

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## **9 Mediating Transcendence**

**the separate 'I'**

**Perhaps the most interesting thing about being human is that we are aware of our own separateness from everything else. Things go out from us to others and come into us from others across an obvious boundary and we know it. We have a distinctive sense of 'I' and a clear sense of that which is not 'me'. The other may be the pen one is writing with, the person one loves, the galaxy.**

**At a deeper level we sense that there is a wholeness which ought to embrace both the**

separate a, and the other from which one is separated - a sort of 'bigger than both of us' sort-of-thing, and which ultimately transcends all things and with which we need to be in touch.

This bigger than both of us' sort of thing may be:

- *either* something which is ultimate source and resource of all power and phenomena - the original exploding supernova, Allah or God;
- *or* something which is really and comprehendingly real by comparison with the illusory and unreal now - Nirvana; the rule of God; the classless society;
- *or* something which is a wholeness taking up our separateness-Brahma, the Eternal, the holistic vision.

Our human difficulty is, and always has been, that because this bigger than both of us' thing is bigger than any of us, on our own we can neither grasp it, nor get its measure. Maybe that is how it should be since were we to succeed in measuring it we might destroy its transcending qualities.

Consequently, we find that in the faith traditions transcendent reality has usually been opened up with the help of some sort of mediating focus:

- for the Christian - Jesus Christ
- for the Jew - the Torah (i.e. the Law, the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible)
- for the Muslim - the Koran (the word of God as revealed to Mohammed)
- for the Hindu - a personal deity or the Atman (i.e. the Self)
- for the Buddhist - the Buddha (i.e. the Enlightened One) or the Dharma (i.e. the Community of Faith, the Law)

These mediating focuses provided the particular characteristics of each faith.

### **the Unitarian protest**

In the Christian tradition, where the Unitarian path is historically rooted, the mediating focus turns out to be a person, a mediator, a go-between, someone in- the middle whose role it is to get two sides together and communicating. Jesus Christ is honoured for his gift of showing the faithful the ways of God. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the one who helps separate persons reach out and stay in touch with the transcending reality which makes all life one.

There are times, however, according to the Unitarian when, instead of opening up free access to the transcendent, Christ's genuine mediating role is articulated in ways which block it off. For example:

- when Christ, as mediator, is described as our only advocate, not showing us how to approach God, but approaching God for us;
- when Christ as mediator is the sole source of any knowledge of God, and when the only channel of worship before the Creator God is said to be 'through Christ our Lord';
- when Christ, as mediator is made a sacrificial substitution for our wrong doings - 'there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin'. [ C. F Alexander *There is a greenhill far away* ]

On such occasions the Unitarian protests vigorously:

- The common mode of stating the doctrine of Christ's mediation ... that the death of Jesus produces a change in the mind of God towards man ... No error seems to us more pernicious. [ William Ellery Channing *Unitarian Christianity* (1819) ]
- Let me admonish you...to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. [ Ralph Waldo Emerson *The Divinity School Address* (1838) ]
- [A mediator] may renew my future; but he cannot change my past ... From present sinfulness he may recover me; but the perpetrated sins - though he be God himself in power... - he cannot redeem. [ James Martineau quoted in Alfred Hall *James Martineau: selections* (1950) p.90 ]

No one, no human person, not even a god, says the Unitarian, has any rights to usurp, or take over, or block off our direct access to the creating, transforming, sustaining power which transcends our separation from one another and the common life of earth and universe. Such access is ours by right of birth.

**mediating transcendence - the Unitarian path**

As he was born and as he died, says historic Unitarianism, Jesus Christ mediates

between our human partiality and the cosmic wholeness by being an example sufficiently supreme in his human closeness to God that he may serve as an excellent pattern.

- He serves, says the Unitarian, as a guide, a model, a waymark, an enabler, a facilitator, a moderator, a guru. He walks beside us to hold our hand, or behind us lest we fall. He may even walk ahead to show us the path - but at the final destination he always steps aside and allow us, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, the privilege of entering the transcendent realm for ourselves.
- He is sufficiently gracious, says the Unitarian, to let us travel with others, rather than with him, others who show a similar mediating Christ-like spirit of human closeness to the spirit of creation - with St. Francis of Assisi who loved the birds, or Mahatma Gandhi who loved the untouchables, or Martin Luther King who loved even those who came upon him with violence.
- He even allows us, says the Unitarian, to seek out alternate mediating highways - that travelled by the Buddha, or those laid down in the Koran, or the Confucian mean, or the Jewish Torah, or the enigmatic yin-yang of the Tao.
- He lets us, says the Unitarian, walk the mediating path of wonder with scientists seeking out the minute particulars of how things are, and the path of beauty and design with those who use the mediums of paint, and sound and words.
- He may also, if we are bold enough and sufficiently confident, allow us, as Emerson said, 'to go alone; to refuse the good models' and develop for ourselves an original relationship with the universe.

The mediating Christ of the Unitarian path is not a possessive Christ or an exclusive one. It recognises that each one of us has different needs in overcoming our separateness. It recognises our need to go it alone for a while, or to walk with others, or to be guided by sacred scripture.

This is, perhaps, what is most precious for those who travel the Unitarian path - that its sure rootedness deep within Judaic-Christian earth allows the traveller space and freedom to explore. It lets us make new spiritual relationships without disloyalty to the old. It lets us make mistakes without chastising us. It lets us speak freely in a dissenting voice; and it allows us to make mature choices about how our separate and individual selves orientate meaningfully with the great transcendent Self of creation.

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## 10 Religious Intention

## keeping faith

This final chapter starts with something about faith along the Unitarian path and finishes with a summary of all ten chapters.

So, first, something about faith. It helps to distinguish between:

- keeping the faith
- and keeping faith.

'Keeping the faith' implies holding on to a tradition, remaining loyal to an inheritance, acknowledging received beliefs. On the other hand 'keeping faith' has more to do with relationship and trust and honesty. *Faith's* Latin equivalent *fides* appears in our word confidence which conveys this sense of 'keeping faith'

Now 'keeping the faith' may sometimes be important for Unitarians but in terms of religious intention 'keeping faith' is much more important.

In the New Testament letter of James, the one Luther disapprovingly called right strawy', we are told very directly that faith without works is dead:

if it does not lead to action, [faith] is a lifeless thing [ *James 2:17* ]

Unitarians may need to hear that frequently but they certainly won't want to argue with it.

Elsewhere in the New Testament it says:

I will pray with my spirit, but also with my mind [ *Corinthians 14.15* ]

**For Unitarians this is especially important since they hold that mindless faith, faith without understanding, is dead too. Albert Schweitzer, the theologian turned medical missionary, who certainly believed that faith without works is dead and who had many Unitarian connections, put it this way:**

**Liberal Christianity has the great task of bringing to humankind once for all the conviction that thought and religion are not irreconcilable. Every deep religion begets thinking and every truly deep thought becomes religious. [ Message to International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom (1947) ]**

**So we may say that on the Unitarian path faith has a double qualification. It ought to be both active and thoughtful. At its best personal faith is a triangular balance between works, thought and faith where each point is in interdependent relationship with the others.**

- **Blind faith is out because it is untried by thoughtful examination and may go the wrong way in action.**
- **Blind works are out because they indicate a lack of both confidence and understanding in what one is doing.**
- **Blind thought is out because it is neither applied in action nor keeps faith with anything.**

**The special Unitarian corner of the triangle, although it is in no way exclusive to the Unitarian path, is the thoughtful, thinking corner. Personal faith among Unitarians is examined and thoughtful faith. It must make sense to us. Dr. William McGill, the late eighteenth century Church of Scotland moderate minister of Ayr who had Unitarian leanings, was of the same mind. He was arraigned before his local Presbytery which brought forth this piece of lampoon from the poet Robert Burns:**

**Doctor Mac, Doctor Mac, ye should streek on a rack,  
To strike evil doers with terror;  
To join FAITH and SENSE upon any pretence  
Was a heretic, damnable error,  
Was a heretic, damnable error.**

**Along the Unitarian path 'Faith and Sense' travel together and together without works**



they are dead.

## concluding summary

Finally, here is a review of where these chapters have been. The review will provide a brief map of the Unitarian path.

**1. Unitarian communities are autonomous democratic religious societies which accept the priority of human mind and conscience. Style and activity rather than theological content bind their members together. Depending upon place and story individual Unitarian communities may lean either towards traditional Christianity or towards religious humanism or towards a universal theism. But in whichever direction they lean, belonging by dissent is always possible. 'Seeking' and 'healing' would be two words which well define their purpose.**

**2. Unitarian worship is guided, but not controlled, by its background of scriptural faith and puritan purpose. So worship is 'wordy' but 'the Word' is diverse and may speak in different voices; and worship is simple, preferring gentle flow to complex rituals. Unitarian worship is always evolving and changing and easily adapts to personal needs and to specific events.**

**3. Unitarian ethics places deeds before creeds, prefers good works to blind faith and gives good practice priority over correct teaching. It prefers morality to moralism, guiding principles to strict rules and caring love to law enforcement. Effective ethics, Unitarians hold, should inform our whole lives. It is to be applied in both private and public spheres and is concerned with our best living in this world rather than any other.**

**4. Being this-worldly, rather than other-worldly, Unitarians encourage social and political involvement. Politics is a way of practising religious concern. Applying it in town and nation and global community is as important as its application to individual- and family life. Participatory structures are preferred to hierarchical ones, and minority rights considered precious. Broadly speaking and in a non-political party sense Unitarians are 'liberal' rather than 'conservative' and are more likely to read The Guardian than The Daily Telegraph.**

**5. Unitarians always used to refer to scripture but then realised that even scripture must be referred to reason. The Bible is not contradicted by the scriptures of other faiths but complemented by them. Read critically, however, scripture shows up as informing myth and community-forming story as often as it does factual history; and if myth informs a community's self then our own personal stories inform our own self-understanding.**

**6. Unitarian teaching sometimes refers backwards to a New Testament understanding that God is one not three and that we should love our neighbours as ourselves; and sometimes refers forward as religious humanists have done proclaiming traditional**

religion as a pre-scientific relic. Very wisely, however, Unitarians also go behind these issues. The distinction between believers and non-believers is false. We are, by nature, people of faith who share a variety of understandings and perceptions.

7. Unitarians, earthed in renaissance culture, puritan ordering and enlightenment thinking, appreciate arts and culture. The 'word' transcends secular and sacred spheres; speaks through art, music, sculpture, architecture and dance as well as in written and spoken words; takes the stuff of this world and reorders it into things of quality and worth. Worth and the acknowledgement of worth, Unitarians are fond of saying, is what wor[th]ship is about. Art and craft may shock with the new but, importantly for Unitarians, must always speak honestly, simply and with imagination.

8. Unitarian spirituality seeks a personal and direct relationship with the creative life of the universe. Its tone is of thanks and praise rather than of human guilt and sin. It tries to gather the different and separated parts of our lives into their wholeness. It is reflective, discursive and tidal rather than directed, formal and regular. For Unitarians spirituality is also as much a communal as it is a private endeavour and is nothing if it seeks to change things without changing us.

9. Unitarians recognise that there are qualities which transcend all our separatenesses. These aspired-for qualities are wholesome and healing. We may gather them together and conceptualise them as God or Nirvana or Brahma or the holistic vision. Others, such as Jesus or Gautama or the Torah or Krishna or Lao Tzu may point us along established and well tried paths of relating to them. We may even take them with us as guides. But for Unitarians these experienced guides will always graciously step aside and allow us the privilege of a direct personal relationship with the divine qualities of being.

10. Finally, for Unitarians, personal faith is about 'keeping faith', about building trust, about maintaining relationships and about developing confidence. It is more than about 'keeping the faith' and assenting to doctrine. Faithfulness ought properly to lead to creative and loving action, but also it should be thoughtful, sensible and reasonable.