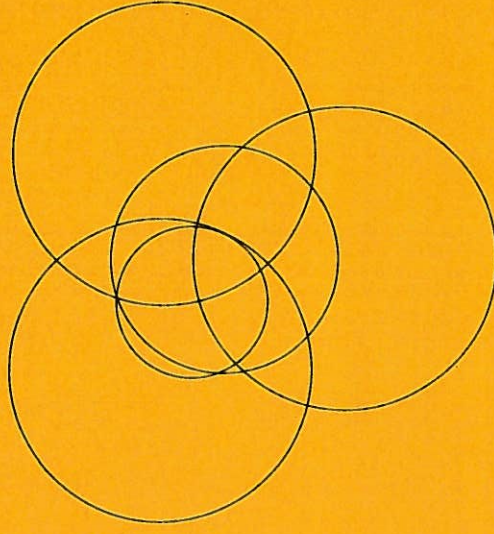




Understanding Unitarians



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Phillip Hewett

Understanding Unitarians

by Phillip Hewett

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UNDERSTANDING UNITARIANS

"Are you a Unitarian without knowing it?" The question has often been thrown out by Unitarians as a challenge. Less often, perhaps, have they felt adequately prepared to deal with such a response as, "How would I know?"

Attempts to explain what makes the use of the term 'Unitarian' appropriate or inappropriate have frequently ended in confusion. What some Unitarians affirm, others deny. "We have individual freedom of belief", it is said. But, the bewildered inquirer might well ask, is there not something that by common consent all Unitarians accept? If not, then how does one know who is a Unitarian and who is not? Does the word have any value at all as a means of identification?

It has been argued with good reason that those who don't stand for something will fall for anything. Cynics have sometimes claimed that Unitarians are always ready to fall for the latest fad, because they have no foundation of unity beneath their diversity. But if this were really so, how does one explain the fact that the Unitarian movement has managed to hold together and survive, often in face of considerable odds, for more than four centuries? Such survival indicates a commitment to something more than a mere agreement to differ. A closer look will show that the road which has been travelled in the course of the centuries has in fact followed a well-defined route, even though, like any other highway, it has had to be continuously redesigned to handle the changing traffic patterns of more recent times.

Unity in diversity, the ideal throughout the evolution of the movement, implies being in touch with all the forces shaping human society at any given time, without being so uncritical as to 'fall for anything'. Such a unity in diversity offers hope in a world where either unity without diversity or diversity without unity are recipes for disaster. In the past as in the present, being a partner in a dialogue of this kind has meant that one carries the marks of what one has learned from it. It is this that shapes a movement and gives it somewhere to stand. So has it been with the Unitarian movement. It merged in specific places and in

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a specific period of history, and it bears the marks of its dialogue with the dominant forces in the life of those times and places. Unitarians would add that those forces are still potent and relevant to the conditions under which we are living in the here and now.

A traditional and productive procedure in trying to understand any phenomenon is to use a model. That model may be artistic or scientific in nature; most often it will have elements of both. In contemporary science it is well understood that models are not the reality they portray, but that they prove their usefulness in equipping us to deal with that reality. A similar attitude has been gaining momentum in theology, where it has come to be realized, for example, that all 'God-talk' is model-making, and that the verbal model must not be taken as a literal depiction of reality. Parables, myths, metaphors are models which have over the course of millennia shown themselves to be extraordinarily fruitful in conveying insights into basic themes with which successive generations have felt themselves called upon to grapple.

What follows represents an attempt to use this procedure in order to gain an understanding of the elusive Unitarian identity. What sort of model will be helpful in interpreting whatever it is that has sustained and guided the Unitarian movement during the centuries of evolution that have brought it down to the present day? Can such a model show that it is just not true that Unitarians stand for nothing and fall for anything?

One model that has been much used when looking at historical development is that of the river. Numerous streamlets flow into it and make it what it is. Earl Morse Wilbur, the most distinguished historian of the Unitarian movement, described that movement as "a fusion or amalgamation of various factors or elements which, arising from widely diverse sources, eventually combined in various proportions in a single stream." The problem with such a metaphor, however, is that once the rivulets flow into the mainstream their separate identities are no longer discernible. The unity overwhelms the diversity, which is not quite what has happened in the Unitarian story.

An alternative metaphor may be more instructive. From time immemorial, life's spiritual pilgrimage has been compared to the

climbing of a mountain. Dante implanted that image firmly in the developing consciousness of the Western world, while in recorded history, climbing the mountain was a powerful influence upon such towering religious leaders as Moses, Jesus and Confucius. Each of the world's religious traditions can in fact be modelled as a team setting out to scale the mountain.

In such an exacting enterprise, one of the most valuable assets will be the rope that binds the team together. The very word 'religion' itself comes from a Latin root meaning 'to bind together'. At a personal level, your religion binds together your beliefs, feelings, actions, values, commitments, trusts, hopes and aspirations – whatever it is that you dedicate yourself to and celebrate, giving your life meaning and direction. It binds you together as a whole person responding to the wholeness of life (or to the holiness of life, which means the same thing). Most often, of course, we fall far short of this. We do not function as whole persons. We feel inwardly torn and divided. Nor do we respond to life as a whole, but to separate fragments that may clash and conflict. But the development of a strong religion does constitute a binding together, not only within our own personalities, but with the human and natural environment. Religion has always built living communities through a sharing of insights, celebrations, aspirations and actions that has bound people together beyond all personal diversities. This is the nature of the team that sets out to climb the mountain.

Each team will be bound together by its own distinctive rope, its shared faith. The rope does not consist of one single strand, but of a number of strands closely intertwined. The tensions to which it will sometimes be subjected show very clearly that such an intertwining yields a strength far beyond that of the separate strands.

Our working model can be seen as a cross-section of such a rope. Yet this alone is not fully adequate, for it draws also upon elements from the metaphor of the streams that meet and merge. Fusion will take place in at least some parts of the model. To that extent it is an abstract model such as will be found in many of the sciences, and although there

may be little danger that the image of a rope or a stream might be taken literally, this does serve as an additional safeguard against taking any metaphor too seriously. Humour, play, paradox are prophylactics against ideology and dogmatism. Every model has its limitations, and alternative models are always possible.

One preliminary point needs to be noted before we proceed to the strands or streamlets. In assessing where Unitarians stand, there is general agreement that the use of the word 'liberal' is appropriate. Unitarians embrace a liberal form of religion. They claim no monopoly in this; such forms exist elsewhere in many places. Like most terms that are used in this kind of discussion, the word 'liberal' requires at least a brief explanation, because it is open to misinterpretation. It is of course being used with a small 'l' which marks it off sharply from the partisan political sense in which it has been used in opposition to 'Conservative'. Unfortunately, that opposition has sometimes been imported into social and religious contexts, where the true opposition is between conservative and radical, or between liberal and illiberal.

Being liberal in the context in which Unitarians use the term demands an honest attempt to respect each human personality and its right to develop according to its own unique pattern. This entails an attempt to understand where others take their stand and to enter into dialogue with them on the assumption that each can be enriched by this. It does not preclude taking a firm stand of one's own, but it does preclude the arrogance that assumes that one's own position is necessarily the only right one.

Liberalism is the word commonly used to describe this attitude, but it would probably be less open to misinterpretation if we were to speak of liberality, just as it is less confusing when referring to attitudes if one speaks of catholicity rather than catholicism, spirituality rather than spiritualism, community rather than communism. The first step in the development of a model can therefore be expressed diagrammatically as in Figure 1.

Though the circles have continuous boundaries, these really have much the same function as contour lines on a map. There is no sharply

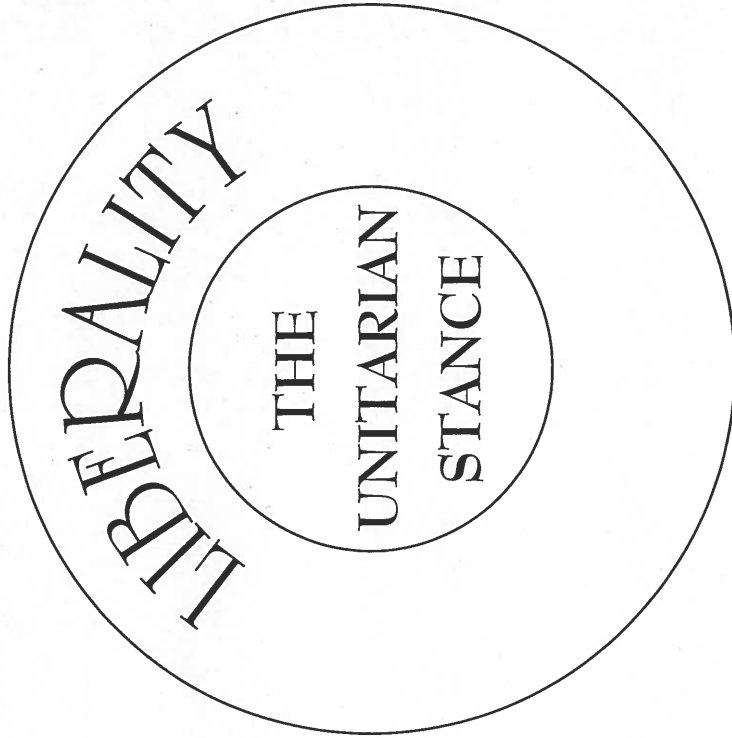


FIG. 1. The Unitarian stance as an expression of liberality

defined change where the line is drawn, but rather a gradual shading over from one zone to the next.

The further development of the model requires that we return to history. The Unitarian movement, as an expression of liberal religion, arose out of a particular context. It would not have evolved in the same way and taken the form it now has if the context had been different. This environment therefore has to be examined if we are to understand why Unitarians are as they are.

The organized Unitarian movement has existed for rather more than four centuries. It took its rise from the great upheaval in the life of Europe known as the Renaissance, which brought the medieval era to a close and ushered in the modern era. The culmination of the Renaissance came in the sixteenth century. It was followed by the Protestant Reformation which transformed the religious scene in Europe and by the rise of modern science, marking a wholly new approach to the acquisition of knowledge and its application to the natural world. These new forces in turn eventually produced the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason.

It was no coincidence that the Unitarian movement first emerged on the continent of Europe in the wake of the Renaissance, nor that it expressed the liberal Renaissance spirit far more fully than did the Protestant Reformers of the same period who could be as totalitarian in their outlook and procedures as the Roman Catholic Church they sought to overthrow. Under similar circumstances two hundred years later, the Unitarian movements of the English-speaking world took shape during the heyday of the Enlightenment, again in dialogue with the spirit of the age. At that time, as in all subsequent periods, there were close links between the Unitarians and the representatives of the leading strands in the life and thought of the day. Those strands came to be intertwined within the Unitarian rope, but outside the Unitarian movement they maintained powerful, separate and often antagonistic lives of their own. Those promoting them could at times speak and act dogmatically.

The first of these influential strands in the life of the modern era has been that of humanism. The Renaissance took its name from the rebirth

of the essential spirit of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, a spirit which glorified human accomplishments and potentialities, as can be seen from a glance at the surviving art of those civilizations. The humanistic focus is primarily, sometimes exclusively, upon human concerns, human values, human progress. Non-human nature as well as human nature is seen as amenable to exploration, explanation and increasingly to control by human reason as exemplified in scientific method. What lies beyond the scope of such exploration, the so-called supernatural, is dismissed as irrelevant or non-existent in views of life completely within the humanistic strand.

The main features of this strand may be presented diagrammatically as follows:

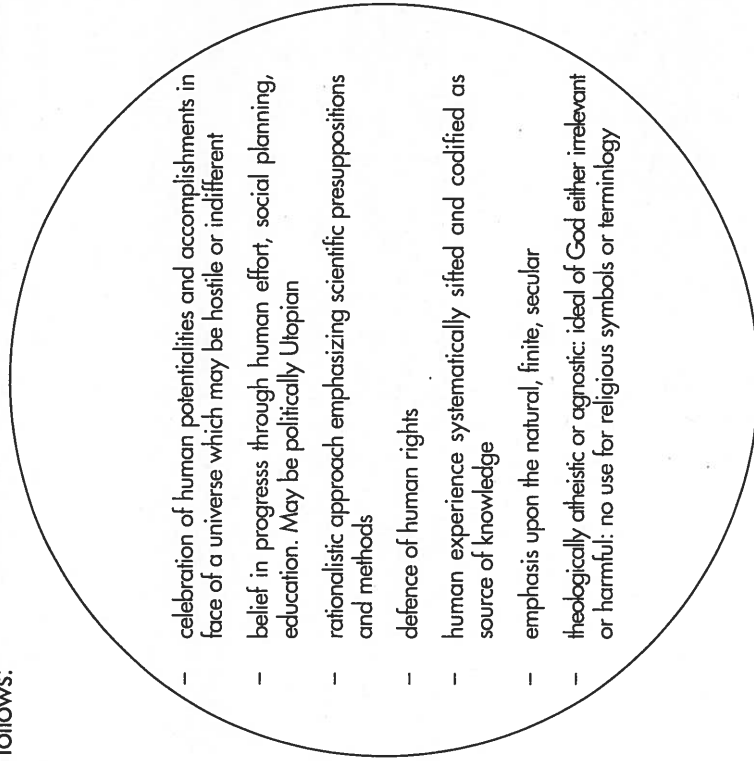


FIG. 2. The Humanistic strand

Unitarians were from the outset powerfully influenced by the humanistic strand. They have emphasized the possibility of improvement of human life in all its dimensions, and the use of reason as the road to valid knowledge. Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), so much the leading Unitarian of his day that for more than two centuries the movement was popularly called Socinian after him, was an outstanding example of a Renaissance humanist, though this was not the only strand in his faith. The church historian A.C. McGiffert wrote: "Socinianism ... was the earliest organized expression of the humanistic spirit in religion." The same spirit flows down through the outlook of eighteenth-century Unitarians like Joseph Priestley and the nineteenth-century Unitarian faith in what the language of the day called "the progress of mankind onward and upward forever". Though the exuberance that could express itself in that way has faded, the heavy emphasis upon human progress, individual and social, as a goal has persisted. So too has faith in the competence, though not the unlimited powers, of human reason.

We move now to the second major strand in the world-view of the modern age, that of Christianity. No longer, as in medieval times in the West, expressing itself through one single organization, it nonetheless continued to exercise a powerful influence upon human thinking and practice. Right down to the present day a majority of the people in the Western world would at least claim to be Christian.

The Christian claim has been and remains that this brief life through which we each pass can only be understood and valued aright in the context of a much larger frame of reference, generally seen as supernatural. Myth and story are keys to a grasp of this larger reality, though these have frequently been codified into creeds and dogmas. All these have focused around the person and role of Jesus Christ, and although there are obvious dangers in making a cult-figure of any individual, it remains true that human beings seem to have a constitutional needs for hero-worship. Personalities gain and maintain a hold upon human imagination and allegiance far beyond that of abstract principles, and this is even more strongly so when such figures are regarded as the embodiment of abstract principles we can admire and seek to embody in our own lives.

The Christian strand can be entered thus into our model:

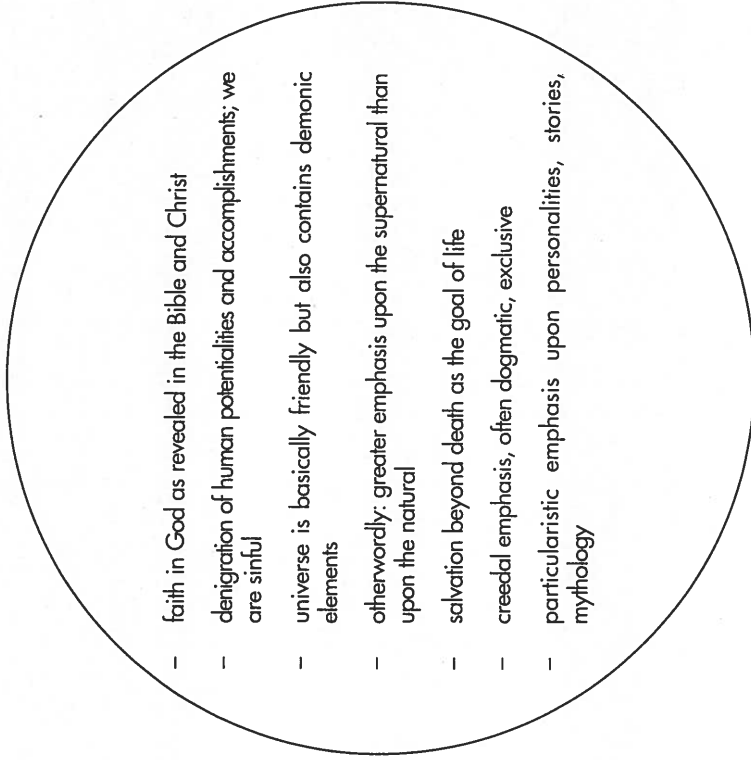


FIG. 3. The Christian strand

Within the Unitarian movement, the Christian strand was from the outset an important one. The earliest Unitarians all came from a Christian background, and in becoming Unitarian they did not feel that they had repudiated Christianity but rather that they had gained a deeper understanding of its essential nature. This attitude has continued. Famous nineteenth-century Unitarian sermons bore such titles as "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" and "Christianity as Christ Preached It", while in the present century a distinguished Unitarian scholar spoke wisely of recovering "the lost radiance of the Christian religion".

The personal evolution of many Unitarians has paralleled that of the

movement as a whole. They spent their earliest years in a Christian setting which later thinking and experience caused them to modify. It has to be added that although they themselves often felt that this had given them a more meaningful Christianity, the typical response of those generally regarded as best qualified to speak in the name of Christianity has been to denounce them as having fallen away from the essentials of the faith, often following this with hostile actions ranging from social ostracism to violent persecution.

Unitarians today are much less disposed to contest the rights of Christians as a whole to define what Christianity is, or to promote a rival definition which would establish their right to the Christian name. Furthermore, the Unitarian movement contains a fair number of adherents whose background has been in Judaism or some other world religion rather than in Christianity. Still, the figure of Jesus remains a highly significant one. Unitarians, no less than others in the culture they have inherited and by which they have largely been moulded, have had that figure set before them as an example and inspiration. Had they been born elsewhere it might have been Mohammed or the Buddha. But why cut off one's roots and try to put down new ones, or, even worse, try to live without any roots at all?

Thus far we have looked at two major strands in the life of the modern era, humanism and Christianity. There have sometimes been attempts to portray the contemporary world as the scene of a battle for supremacy between the two. It is true that there has in fact often been conscious antagonism and conflict, but as in other similar situations there has also been a great deal of mutual influence, resulting in an area of overlap within which people respond to the power of both these forces and succeed in arriving at some kind of synthesis. Certainly this has been true of Unitarians. "I, personally, call myself a Christian Humanist", declared G. Randall Jones, preaching to a General Assembly of British Unitarians more than forty years ago. Such a self-identification has been by no means confined to Unitarians. More usually, however, those who have taken substantially the same point of view have chosen to call themselves liberal Christians, or radical Christians. The choice as to which

word is taken as the adjective and which as the noun may or may not mark a real difference for emphasis.

The zone of mutual influence or intersection between humanism and Christianity may be entered into the model as follows:



FIG. 4. Christian Humanists and Radical Christians

The interaction between humanism and Christianity has been by no means the only tension shaping the life and thought of the modern era that is of relevance to where Unitarians take their stand. There is a third major strand which unfortunately lacks a generally agreed name. Some sociologists, particularly sociologists of religion, call it universalism, and this is the convention that will be followed here, with some misgivings, as to possibilities of confusion in that Universalism (with a capital 'U') has also carried a different meaning, particularly in the United States. There it was the name of a specific denomination, historically distinguished by its belief in universal salvation in an afterlife. The great majority of the congregations of the Universalist Church of America merged with those of the American Unitarian Association in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, since which time there has been an increasing tendency to apply the twofold name, with Unitarian as the adjective and Universalist as the noun, not only to the association but also to individuals. It needs to be emphasized that this is not the sense in which 'universalistic' is being used here.

This universalistic strand could also be called holistic, inclusive, even catholic in the sense in which that word implies catholicity. It looks beyond particulars to the universal that is expressed through them. It looks behind religions to religion, behind distinctions of nationality, race and gender to the universal human condition, behind alienation of the human from the natural to an all-embracing ecological awareness. Such an awareness was a pronounced feature of the religions described and often dismissed as 'pagan', a word whose etymology expresses the natural connection. All historical religions have also had their mystical aspects which have transcended the conventional divisions based upon labels and dogmas. A Christian mystic, a Buddhist mystic, a nature-mystic all understand each other at a level beneath that of words and symbols.

There has always been a tendency within this trend to run towards an attempt to live in the universal alone (Thoreau wrote in *Walden*: "Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?"). Alternatively, there may be a syncretism which tries to build a sort of social and

religious Esperanto. But the universalistic approach does not have to take such forms. Charles Davis, a contemporary theologian whose move in this direction led to a public break with the Roman Catholic Church, writes: "A mature universalism is a degree of self-reflection sufficient to allow one to discern the distinction between the universal and the particular in the tradition which is one's own."

The universalistic strand may be entered thus into the model:



FIG. 5. The Universalistic strand

In the evolution of the specifically Unitarian tradition, the universalistic strand has played an increasingly important role, though it was there from the outset. The pioneer Unitarian Michael Servetus (1510 - 1553) was led to the reflections that resulted in his change of theology by his search for a common basis that could make it possible for Jews, Muslims and Christians to live together in harmony if not in unity. From that early point onward, Unitarians pursued the same search, broadening it as communications improved to include the religions of the orient.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose influence upon nineteenth-century Unitarian thinking was enormous, wrote a poignant poem lamenting the alienation from the natural world that had come to mark the modern era, and contrasting this with the attitudes of an earlier generation who

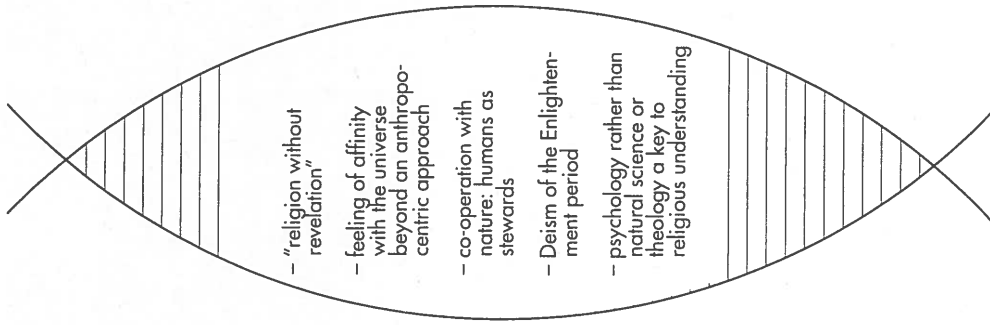
‘Were unitarians of the united world,
And, wheresoever their clear eye-beams fell,
They caught the footsteps of the SAME.’

In the century and a half since this was written, such a view has gained greatly in strength and popularity. The receptivity Unitarians have shown to feminist, ecological and mystical insights has made this strand probably the most significant and appealing one for newcomers drawn to the movement.

We can now proceed, as we did for the humanistic-Christian interaction, to look at the way in which both of those strands have interacted with the universalistic one. In the first of these the interaction between the humanistic and universalistic strands produces an outlook that may be called religious humanism and entered into the model as in Figure 6.

For the product of the second interaction the choice of terminology is less easy. Those finding themselves within this sector of the model may call themselves ecumenical Christians or universalistic Christians. Some contemporary Christian writers find it impossible to place themselves within categories that would appear to shut them out from participating in other religious traditions. Catholics such as Charles Davis and

UNIVERSALISTIC



HUMANISTIC

FIG. 6. Religious Humanists

Matthew Fox have run afoul of church discipline through insistence upon the universal as well as the particular in expressing their own identity. John S. Dunne speaks appreciatively of the way in which one can "pass over" to the experience of those from other faiths, while Raymond Panikkar claims to be equally completely both a Christian and a Hindu. Such views are encountered more and more frequently in today's world.



FIG. 7. Universalistic Christians

The separate interactions that have been considered thus far now need to be brought more realistically together in a representation of the world of faith and action we actually inhabit. (See Figure 8).

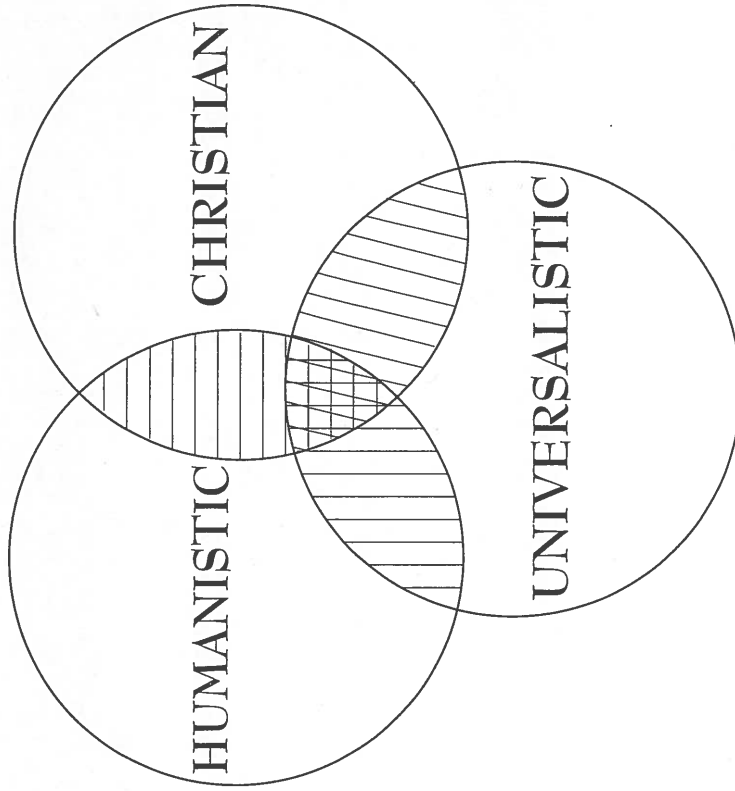


FIG. 8. Interaction of the three strands

The three major strands – humanistic, Christian and universalistic – are all at work. They compete, they enter into dialogue, they intertwine and coalesce. Within each one there is a liberal sector which lies closest to the area of positive interaction and there is a fundamentalist sector which believes that only its own single strand can provide the basis for a meaningful and valid orientation to the world.

The background to an understanding of where Unitarians take their stand is now complete. It remains only for Figure 1 to be superimposed upon Figure 8:

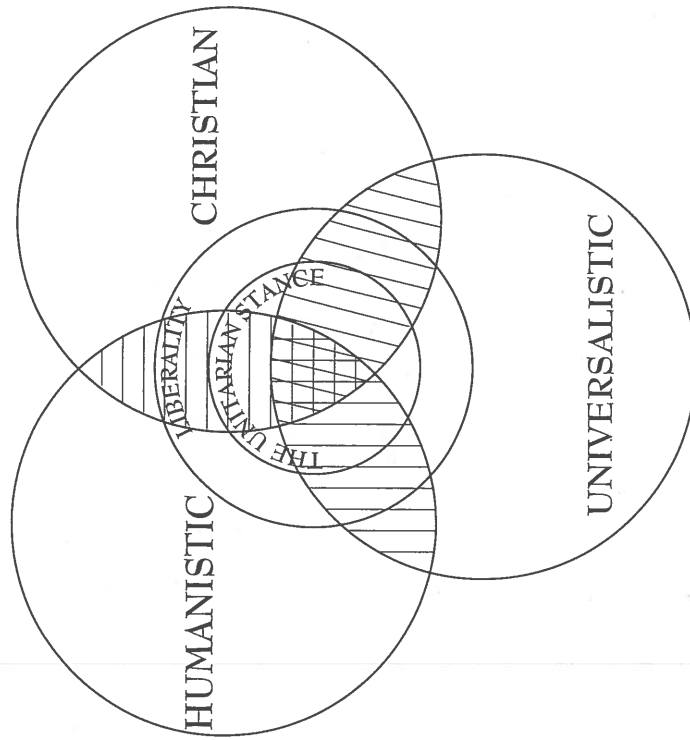


FIG. 9. Location of the Unitarian stance

Unitarians belong not only within the circle of liberality but also within the area of interaction of the three strands in the faith of the modern age, the area of unity in diversity. A closer look at the component parts comprised within the Unitarian circle, the Unitarian rope, will make the nature of this unity in diversity much clearer (Figure 10).

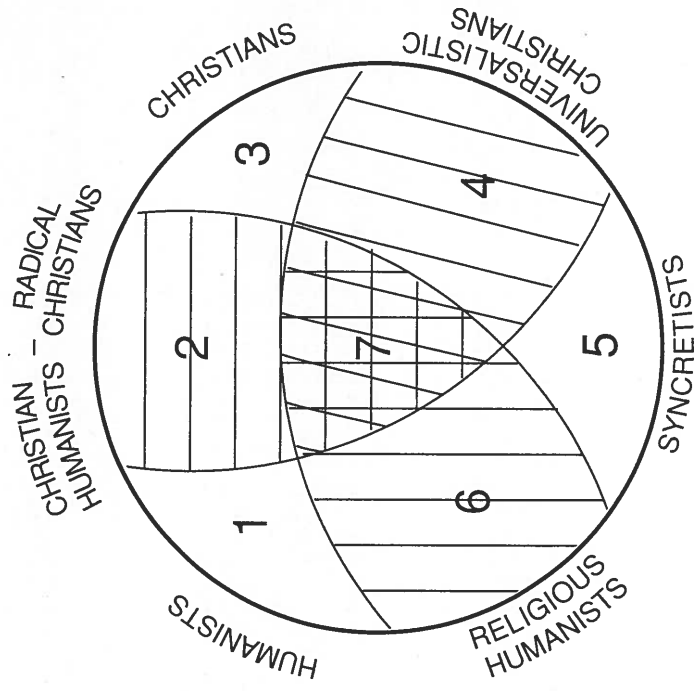


FIG. 10. Varieties of Unitarian diversity

According to the model, Unitarians come in seven varieties. Obviously, this is an artificial over-simplification of the real situation. It must be stressed once again that the hard boundaries in the model represent a gradual shading over from one designated area to another. What we really have is an organism, not a precision-built machine. Yet, for all its limitations, the model is presented as an aid to a genuine understanding of the nature of the Unitarian movement, of Unitarian congregations, of Unitarian individuals and of the larger context within which they live, work and worship.

If we run quickly around the circle we see that positions 1, 3 and 5 are the ones in which we will find the most aggressive promotion of a single strand most of which lies outside the Unitarian circle of unity in diversity. Those within these sectors are likely to identify themselves primarily as humanists or Christians or world citizens, and only secondarily as Unitarians. Those in the other four sectors would be likely to identify themselves primarily as Unitarians, perhaps with a qualifying adjective. In the centre of the circle one would be living in the tension to which all the strands contribute equally; this would be a rare situation. Individuals and groups are continually migrating within the circle, sometimes shifting its centre of gravity.

There could be a more radical displacement, in which the whole movement (or, more likely, a single congregation) slips from its pivot at the centre of interaction. Such a slippage would have the effect of making those who identify with the sectors that diminish or disappear altogether feel that they no longer belong. If they withdraw, then the slippage is accentuated. The danger becomes even greater if it becomes so drastic that it takes part of the Unitarian circle outside the circle of liberality, making illiberal attitudes acceptable within the group. (See Figure 11).

Although the model now completed will generally be valid for an understanding of Unitarian movements anywhere in the Western world, each local situation will also have its own unique characteristics. Another model would need to be superimposed upon this one to take full account of the ways in which a national history, political developments,

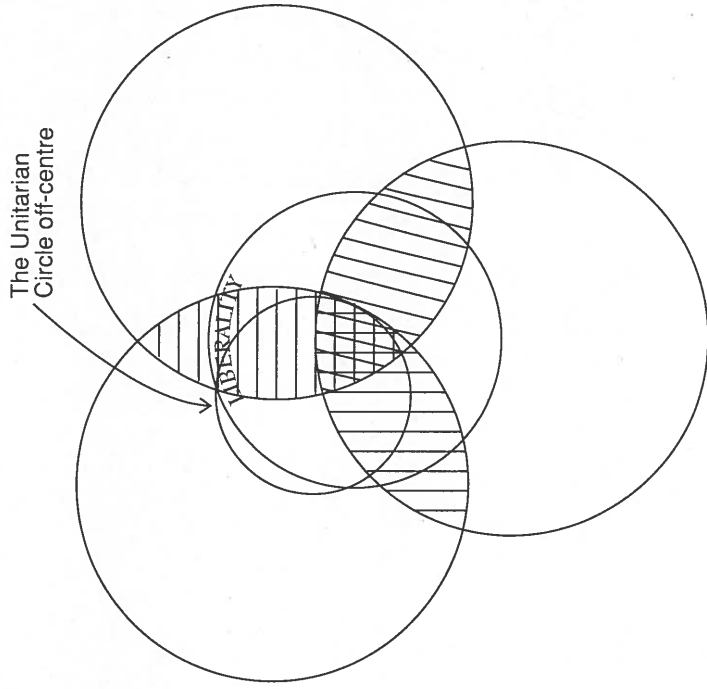


FIG. 11. Slippage in the Unitarian stance

economics, cultural life and even climate can have their effects in modifying any religious movement. And outside the Western world, the differences in religious tradition will affect the model itself. For instance, in India the Hindu strand will replace the Christian one.

Despite its limitations, the model we have been using can lead to far more positive results in understanding and in practice than alternative models which have too often been implicit in the ways differences within the Unitarian movement have been understood and handled. One such model is that of a parliament in which contending parties vie for power, sometimes with few scruples over the way they treat the opposition. In fact, the word 'party' has been used not infrequently in ecclesiastical life, as in speaking of the High Church and Low Church parties in the Church of England. When tension (which is inherent in diversity) becomes contention, the results can be very destructive for the organization, for the context within which it operates, and for the individuals involved. Emerson once wryly observed that a sect or party is an elegant incognito devised to save an individual from the vexation of thinking.

We return then to the more positive metaphor of the climbing rope. Unitarians can be grateful for the various strands that are intertwined in their rope, and for the strength they give it as it is used to scale the peaks of life. But nothing can ever be taken for granted. Four centuries of history notwithstanding, the success or failure of the Unitarian experiment in unity in diversity remains an open question. The same is true of other similar experiments, whether social, political or religious. But in a world of which pluralism is an inescapable feature, and where illiberal forces lash out destructively from time to time, the ultimate success of such attempts may provide the only grounds for hope that our species and its fellow-voyagers on this little planet will survive and prosper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Originality, I fear," wrote W.R. Inge, one-time Dean of St Paul's, "is too often only undetected and frequently unconscious plagiarism." The model that has been presented is the outcome of reflections on this theme over the course of many years. The sources that have fed into these reflections may in some instances have long since been forgotten. There are some debts of which I am aware, however, and which I gladly acknowledge. In his book *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, Arnold Toynbee reduced the varieties of religious expression in the whole of human history to "variations on Man's worship or quest of no more than three objects or objectives: namely, Nature; Man himself; and an Absolute Reality that is not either Nature or Man but is in them and at the same time beyond them." More than forty years ago, Professor George H. Williams, then at Starr King School for the Ministry in California and subsequently at Harvard, set forth a scheme in which he divided Unitarians into Christocentric theists, universal theists and humanists. Much more recently, a similar analysis has been presented by Professor Marvin C. Shaw of Montana State University. I cannot myself accept the term 'theist' as in any way adequately descriptive of what I have called the third strand, where if theological terms were to be used, pantheist or panentheist would usually be much more appropriate than theist. Theism is normally understood to mean belief in a personal God transcending the universe and yet immanent within it, its creator and sustainer. The model here described was first presented in an address to the Canadian Unitarian Council at its annual meeting in Winnipeg in 1991 and is based upon material delivered from the pulpit to the congregations in Auckland, New Zealand and Victoria, British Columbia. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions that came from the hearers on these occasions, as also to members of my congregation in Vancouver with whom the same concepts were discussed. Finally, I appreciate the assistance given by Margaret Donald in designing the diagrams.

Phillip Hewitt