

What is Unitarianism?

by Alan Ruston

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ALL people have a faith by which they live. Many have a church to which they belong, in which they would choose to educate their children, or where they would christen or dedicate them. They turn to this church for a marriage, or for a funeral or burial service. The two - the faith one lives by and the church affiliation - are not, however, necessarily the same. That faith may be nothing but a belief that tomorrow is worth experiencing. It could be merely a conviction that, while life may be meaningless, one is curious enough to know what comes next.

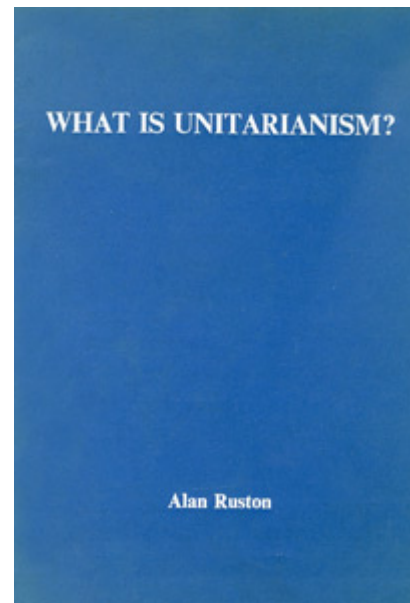
The Unitarian church, however, aims to make these two spheres of life the same. It aims to do this because it is a faith that considers it has not reached the final truth. The great historic creeds of Christendom, although of inestimable value, amount to a specific body of belief, rooted in the past and unchanged in their formation over many centuries.

Differing interpretations there may be, but they provide a final authority and embodiment to a majority of orthodox churchmen. It is at this point, Unitarians believe, that there comes the danger of the divergence of the faith we live by and our church affiliation.

Unitarianism does not aspire to settle down into being a static faith, a totally coherent philosophy to be defended against all assaults. It is rather a quest for values which each person must develop for himself. In this light, it has been said that a Unitarian church is not one where an individual comes to learn a faith, but rather to develop a faith of his own. It may differ from that of the person sitting alongside in the pew, but each will hold a personal faith seen and felt by all. Based on experience, it will not offer repose (although it can bring a great peace of mind) because life changes with the years and the Unitarian hopes his faith will evolve in the process.

Diversity is to be found in all Unitarian churches, of which there are over three hundred in this country. To go to one of them does not give a full picture of the Unitarian faith, and certainly more than one should be experienced before any conclusions can be reached. But our churches do have certain things in common, which an American Unitarian minister, Rev. Harry Meserve, has suggested to be:

- (1) Religion is understandable in terms of human experience.
- (2) Religion makes its impact in ethical terms on society.
- (3) In freedom of worship, the principles of religious liberalism can be discerned.



(4) Religion is a universal experience, rather than one limited to a segment of the human race for either cultural or ideological reasons.

(5) Jesus of Nazareth stands out in our minds because he rightly belongs in the class of the great saviours of mankind.

(6) Religious fellowship is a means of helping us mutually deepen and strengthen our own lives and those of our companions of the way.

With these points in mind, what do we find in a local Unitarian church? We find - above all - independence. Each church is a sovereign entity, responsible for its own affairs. It calls its own minister, and dismisses him if it wishes. It builds its own church structure, and pulls it down if it wishes. It even disbands itself if it considers its useful purpose has been achieved. The churches are loosely united in the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, which helps with advice, money and ministerial recommendation, but has no control over the local congregation; nor does it seek it. Its advice is frequently ignored. The Unitarian church is not the place for the person with the over-tidy mind, who may require a hierarchical church organization. Unitarian churches are inconsistent, going different ways, but as each sees the way forward in a slightly different manner, it cannot be otherwise.

We look to our ministers to provide effective leadership. But they are not shepherds of a flock of sheep - they are stimulators of a religious quest that can never reach finality. We respect, but rarely venerate, our ministers. They are essential to us but not to our theology. We are a lay church, and our ministers are an essential part of our laity. The running of the church is not in the hands of minister or churchwarden, but a committee of church members. The minister is rarely the chairman of this body, but usually an invited member who often does not vote. The committee takes its particular church into the future; as the minister is not empowered to do this it gives him an unusual influence over those to whom he ministers.

Unitarian church buildings are of various types, sizes and dates: some are beautiful eighteenth century meeting houses that were mostly Presbyterian and evolved into Unitarianism; others are large Victorian Gothic buildings with stained glass windows; others are modern all-purpose buildings; we even have "tin huts". But the organization of all is the same. The conduct of worship to be found varies. There is a tradition (now in decline) of using a prayer book sometimes specifically written for a particular congregation. But the majority have what has become to be known as the "open" form of service of prayers, readings, hymns and sermon. Though by no means universal, a variation on this pattern can be found in most Unitarian churches. Most congregations very much like services out of a general pattern. Thus there are All Faith Services, services of readings and silence, meditations aided by music - the variations are legion. So, although the service may appear the same for a few Sundays, it will be found that the pattern will suddenly be altered-adding, it is hoped, a new vitality and meaning to worship. Some of our churches celebrate communion, finding meaning in their own interpretation of this service, while others entirely refute the ritual. Many support the right for others to have a communion service but reject it personally.

A new form of organization among Unitarians are fellowships. These are small groups who meet together in an area where there is no church. They meet in many places but most frequently in Quaker meeting houses, an atmosphere where they find an affinity of outlook. Very often, these are examples of pure democracy, there being no committee and rarely a minister. They conduct their own service with invited speakers, and are the means whereby

Unitarianism is extended in this country in areas where previously it was non-existent. Unitarians living in an area where there is no church or fellowship are catered for by the National Unitarian Fellowship which aims to unite these people in a larger grouping to which they can identify.

Unitarian churches have many organizations within them giving them similarities to the orthodox churches. There are Women's Leagues (who do so much for the churches in many ways); Youth Groups; Discussion Circles and the like. These can be found with many variations, and add abundantly to the life of the churches.

Many questions are asked by enquirers about organization, and often an answer is difficult. How do you become a member of a Unitarian church? There is no general rule, but mostly it is by paying a small subscription and stating yourself to be in sympathy with the aims of the church. As there is no credal statement to unify the practice, churches are rightly proud of varying the usage. Many have a special service for new members whereby the church gives the "right hand of fellowship" to newcomers. This phrase perhaps best sums up the meaning of church membership; there is an actual ceremony of shaking hands with the minister and the chairman of the congregation. But this is by no means a requirement, and those who feel embarrassed by a service of this nature are generally accepted without it. Membership does not bind or restrict, and it is accepted that many will go to churches of other denominations at the same time as they attend ours; anything that heightens our spiritual awareness can only be welcomed.

Another question often asked is how do churches, organized on this basis, stay together and not degenerate into warring factions? A large number of Unitarian churches have been in existence for over 300 years. Persecution in early times kept them together (Unitarianism was legalised only in 1813) but, after 1850, there was increasingly a feeling that our message to society was an essential one and our approach so basic and unique that we needed to band together to present it. Many of our attributes and beliefs can be found in other churches, but only Unitarianism completely expresses them all for us in the spirit of freedom. Very often Unitarianism has been a movement of thought rather than a church and many see this as the way ahead rather than in a denominational structure. Freedom to believe and fulfil yourself in an evolving faith is still not found widely in our society, and our continuance as a church affirms this, as no other structure does.

Unitarianism is an institution, and like all institutions, has its defects. It may be that you will visit a church that does not in any way match up to the principles that have been elucidated. Freedom may have become licence, or fossilized into a rigid structure, and all Unitarian churches which have had a long life have gone through these phases. But it is a "phase" that will pass as a generation passes, and the church will return in spirit to its historical standpoint. This has happened so often that we see it as part of our evolution through time.

As an institution there are corporate bodies to which the churches belong. The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches has already been mentioned. Formed in 1928, this body holds an annual assembly to which churches send delegates. Its functions are wide and it represents a broad national interest in youth work, social responsibility, international matters, etc. Its general secretary is its administrative head and very often expresses views held by many Unitarians at a national level. The ceremonial head of this body is a president, one year a minister, one year a layman, who in his year of office attempts to visit as many congregations as possible to provide a unifying element. Thus we see

expressed part of the continuing dynamic of the movement; each church diversified and leading its own life in its own community, and the General Assembly attempting to take up these strands and unify them.

In between the local church and the national organization, there are sixteen district associations. They were formed originally early in the last century, in days of poor communications, as local associations of churches for extending our witness. Now they have become increasingly regional organizations for extending fellowship, and to give help to their constituent member churches when requested. Their structure is that of congregational representatives, and neither the General Assembly nor its representatives are members. Like congregations, they are autonomous; yet membership is not individual but congregational. Additionally they act in the chain between national and local level. All Unitarian churches belong to both of these bodies but with differing enthusiasm. An increasing number of Unitarians find greater meaning in membership of the General Assembly, but still the emphasis is on the local congregation, without which the other organizations are totally meaningless.

Other national organizations exist in a variety of forms. There is the Unitarian Young People's League, Women's League, Unitarian Historical Society, Church Music Society, Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies, etc. All these are made up of individuals or branches, not of congregations. These allow for participation on a national level in concerns that are felt by Unitarians up and down the country. Like most Unitarian organizations, they are predominantly made up of laymen who run them. Few of our national organizations are run by ministers for us, they are run by us. When we form a committee on anything (and in a structure like ours they abound!), we would no more have it entirely composed of ministers or laymen than we would have a credal basis for membership. Each must advise the other, and although we see no essential distinction between the two, the background and standpoint of each must of necessity be diverse so each must be heard.

To present Unitarianism in so few words to the enquirer is almost an insuperable task. No mention has been made of the international movement of Unitarianism, to be found in such strength in North America - and elsewhere; of the origins of Unitarianism in Transylvania many centuries ago, where an active church still exists despite immense difficulties; of our denominational papers, like *The Inquirer*. Neither has any mention been made of great Unitarians of the past, many of whom are household names, who were stirred into activity by the vitality of their faith. Books on these and many other issues can be found in local libraries, local churches or by contact with our headquarters in London. They are essential reading if the strands of our faith are to be understood at the local church level. The context in which we worship demonstrates as well as our history the general principle by which we come together, both individually and collectively.

To express a brief summary of a Unitarian faith and aim is not easy; but William L. Sullivan has caught an essence of it in these words:

"To outgrow the past, but not to extinguish it; To be progressive, but not raw;
To be free, but not mad;
To be critical, but not sterile;
To be expectant, but not deluded;
To be scientific, but not to live in formula that cuts us off from life;
To hear, amidst the clamour, the pure deep tones of the spirit;

To turn both prosperity and adversity into servants of character;
This is to attain peace; this is to invest the lowliest life with magnificence. "

Publisher's Note

This is a Unitarian publication, issued under the auspices of the Publications and Publicity Department of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. If you have found it of interest, there are many other books, short and long, simple and complex, which will help you to gain a greater understanding in the message of this group of free churches which are to be found all over Great Britain, and also in many countries overseas. There are variations within these churches, as will be obvious enough from the book which you have read; but their congregations are united by the desire to find a meaning in life, and a meaning in the religious approach to life's problems.

For those who may be in some difficulty with religion - especially for those who are disillusioned by the dogmatic certainty expressed by some orthodox bodies - the Unitarian approach may have a very definite appeal. This appeal can be studied in its completest form only as a member of a congregation, for religion can best be appreciated by a group of people sharing in worship, and in the social work with which all churches are bound to be concerned. But if there is no Unitarian church in your neighbourhood, there is the National Unitarian Fellowship, which deliberately sets out to cater for isolated Unitarians, and for those who for some reason are unable to join in the work of a regular congregation or fellowship. Details of the National Unitarian Fellowship, and the addresses of Unitarian churches, can be obtained by writing to Unitarian Information, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London, WC2R 3HY. The books listed below can be obtained from the Essex Hall Bookshop, at the same address. These books will be found helpful by thoughtful inquirers, and have all been written by Unitarian ministers and laymen who have discovered in Unitarianism an encouragement which for them is lacking in the work and worship of more orthodox bodies.

These have been arranged alphabetically under authors. If you order them by post, a small extra amount should be added to cover cost of postage.

Books to Read

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

Wallace Tavener: *The Path of Humanism* 371/2p
Kenneth Twinn (ed.): *Essays in Unitarian Theology* 371/2p

This is only a small selection of the books available; but they should give you enough to be getting on with! If you start with a few of these, the Essex Hall Bookshop will be glad, on request, to send a copy of the complete list of Lindsey Press publications.

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

John Rowland (Publications Officer)

Alan Ruston is a civil servant, a graduate of London University, and a leading Unitarian layman. In his early 30s, he has occupied many positions in the denomination, and is at present Chairman of the Unitarian Social Service Department, President of the Unitarian Lay Preachers' Association, and Secretary of the London Lay Preachers' Association. He is an after-care associate of the Inner London Probation and After-Care Service, and has always been interested in the social applications of religious faith.

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