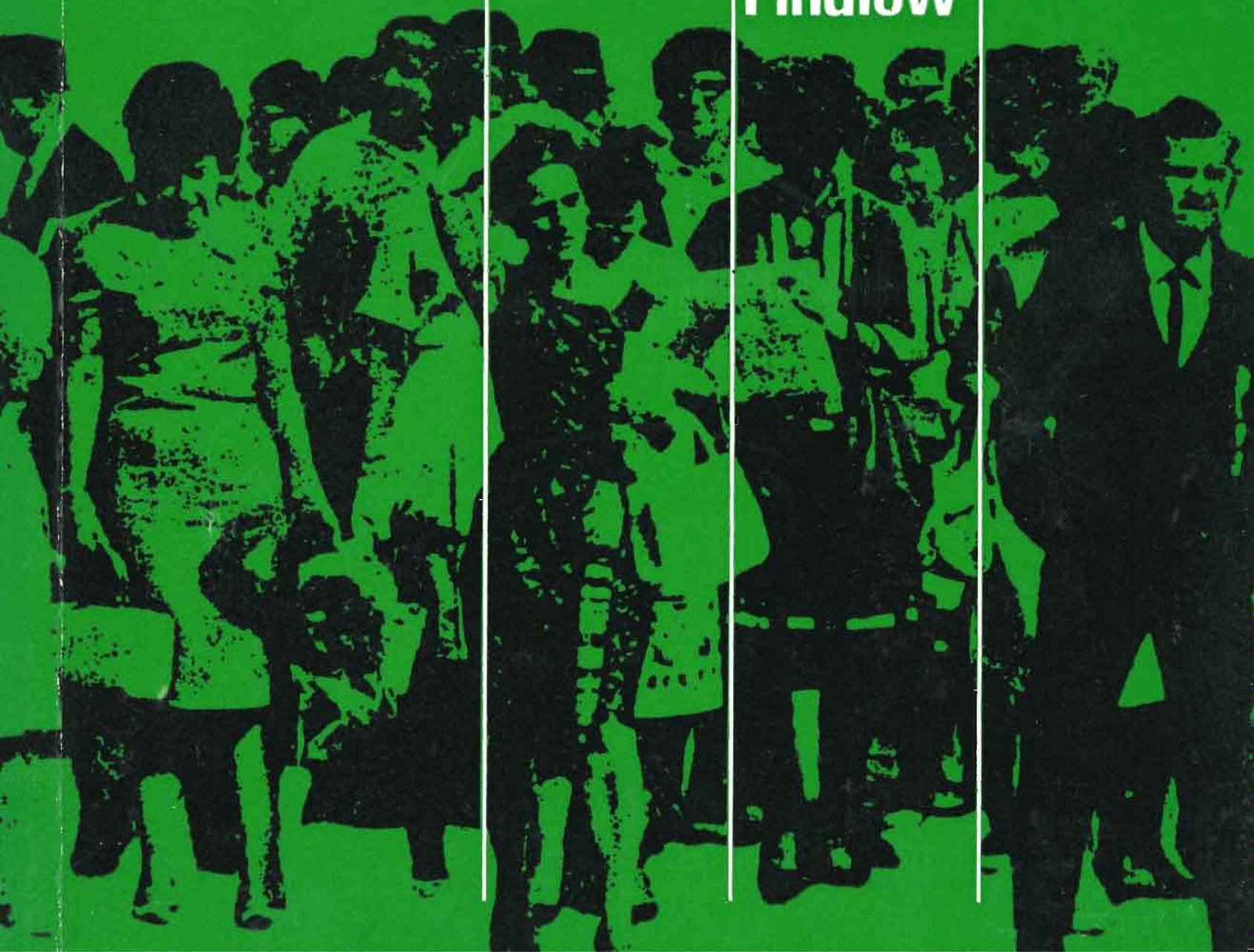


# Finding the place



Bruce  
Findlow



By the same author

Kharang

Unitarianism, A Faith with a Future

Religion in People

I Question Easter

I Believe

# FINDING THE PLACE

Bruce Findlow



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## INTRODUCTION

*The chapters which follow began life as sermons preached to the largely Unitarian congregation of St. Mark's Church in Edinburgh. Subsequently they were read by a larger and more diverse group of people; the readers of the newsletter Waymark, published ten times a year and sent to many parts of the world. Waymark is now in its fifth year of publication and the twelve sermons which make up this collection come from the years 1969-72. They have been chosen by me from a larger selection made by a reader for the publishers.*

*A colloquialism in this generation which describes bewildered people as those who have "lost the place" points to the title of the book. T. S. Eliot has the Magi say "not a moment too soon finding the place" at the end of their search for the child. Preaching and writing in the Unitarian tradition are better thought of as signposts to help some to find the place for themselves rather than definitive maps for the journey we all make, or descriptions of a place we all ought to find.*

*In Jeremiah, at chapter 31 verse 21 it used to be possible to read, "Set up waymarks for yourself, make yourself guideposts." These chapters are, in several senses, "waymark sermons" humbly offered to Unitarians and others.*

BRUCE FINDLOW.

## STARTING FROM THE RIGHT PLACE

THERE is an old joke told against country folk about the city traveller who stopped on a country road to ask a local inhabitant the way to some more civilised spot. The simple countryman thought long and hard, wrestled with the problem of communication, gave up the struggle and replied: "If I was you I wouldn't start from here!" Remembering that, and thinking of this Sunday as the first of a new year, as a kind of starting point, I arrived at a question: Where is the starting point for good living? On the other Sundays of this month I will be talking about some aspects of good living—making friends, being successful, living together, being alone: and there has to be some underlying assumption, some rock on which we can build. So the prior question is something like "Where is the starting point for good living?" "Where is the source of

true values for living ? ” “ What constitutes the basis of reality on which I can build a truthful life ? ” “ Where, in life, is the right place to start from ? ”

I found the question without knowing the answer in advance. So I have had to think about it a good deal for a week or more. First I found an easy answer—we start from where we are, or if you like, who we are ; so there is no one starting place for all of us. But that is not good enough ; there is neither comfort nor courage to be got from that. Then I thought that, of course, many of us must have already established our basis for good living ; it is not something we still have to find ; but perhaps, from time to time, we need to take another look and make sure that we have not lost sight of the basis of reality on which our life is built. On the other hand, there is evidence all around us of uncertain living, day-to-day hand-to-mouth living, which tells us that there are people who do not have, or are not conscious of, a firm starting point for coherent, consistent living. So I went on asking myself questions and this is how the process went, and where it led me, in the end.

#### **outside our self**

Do we safely base our lives upon some standard which is outside our self, something to be found in society ; such as the values of the majority, the values of our class, the cultural pattern in which we have a place, British standards, or the Scottish way of life, or European values ? It is true, I suppose, that all of us shape our lives in some measure at least according to values and patterns in society around us. We may be slaves of fashion or more hesitant followers, but followers nevertheless. We may be caught in the career rat-race ; no longer free to make wholly inward decisions about where to live, what work to do, how to spend our money, because we have committed ourselves to conform to the rules of some profession or the policies of some agency or business concern.

If our whole life is lived on this kind of basis our foundations are shaky indeed. The ways of the world change all the time

in large matters and small ones and if we simply follow prevailing ideas or trends we are forever having to change our ways and perspectives in order to feel secure in whatever the new social situation is. Many people do live much of their life like this and they get by well enough perhaps if they do not expect to leave any individual mark on the human story, and if they are spared the kind of fundamental situations which force us back upon our own resources and our own ultimate view of life. But too often—because illness, failure, bereavement, touch nearly everyone at some time or another—too many people find their life insecure or purposeless because it is based upon the transient values of society rather than some secure foundation of reality. We may go along with many social ideas or values if we have some other right place to start from ; but they do not, of themselves, provide that right place for anyone.

#### **religious beliefs**

Outside ourselves is another possibility, which is to have a basis for living rooted in beliefs or realities of a religious kind which are not our own, not coming from within or living within us ; but which form an outer shell to our life in the same way as society does. A devout Christian may say that Christ is the centre and foundation of his life. Hymnwriters say, with the psalmist, that God is a rock, a fortress, a sure foundation. In the same category, though not perhaps of the same intensity, are statements about the teachings of Jesus, or the imitation of Christ, or the teachings or creeds of the church, as being the right place to start from in living a good life—or a Christian life (which may not be the same thing). Can we all find a right place to start from in faith in a God who is outside ourselves—a benevolent creator or governor of the universe, a kind father, a protective lord ? The answer seems to be that some can and some cannot. Perhaps, more precisely, in our day fewer and fewer find this kind of basis for good living. Similarly, the teachings of Jesus or of the church seem less and less acceptable

to people ; less able to take first place in people's lives in competition with the pressures of society. It may be true that belief in a transcendent reality is the surest basis for good living, but in the modern world it is a belief hard to come by, and hard to hold on to ; and many do not have it. A right place to start from which can be commended to everyone cannot be found now in the traditional ideas of religion. A divine imperative, sacred values or principles, as traditionally understood, are not real to most people and therefore are not available to them as a real basis for good living.

### **in or of the human self**

The alternative to these outward possibilities must be some inward one ; something in or of the human self which is common to all of us and real enough to be a firm foundation for the beliefs, decisions and actions which make up much of our life. It may be something which we can think of collectively as being a shared human reality, such as a collective mind or spirit ; and some may think of it as a shared divine reality, a divine spirit within the human condition, in and among humanity as a whole. That will at once seem to some people too vague to be sure about. To think of a human spirit or divine spirit may seem all right for rare moments of idealism or exaltation ; but as the firm foundation for everyday, bread-and-butter living it seems too unsure, too intangible, too elusive of description or categorisation to be the right place to start from in the enterprise of good living, person to person.

### **our own self**

We come back then to ourselves or, more precisely, our self, and some will tremble at the idea of discovering there a firm reality for all the decisions and actions of good living. Many of us spend as little time as possible looking at our own self, our own being. It is a lonely, perilous process, we think, and we would rather look at others ; taking up the role of fairly detached observers of the lives of others, rather than being

devoted detectives in search of the truth of our own life. Many of us, however, do come to know a good deal about our self through one means or motive or circumstance or another ; and what we will find for sure is that the rock bottom reality of our self is hard to find. We can see that we act parts in different situations or adopt one particular role and act it out for most of a lifetime. We can see that we put on masks when we have to face others ; we build walls of reticence when we have to mix with others. We store away secrets, we find ways of avoiding too much reality both within and outside our self. Our lives are records of contriving and adaptation ; fitting ourselves into the life around us so that we can feel secure and comfortable, building up a picture of ourself which we can bear to contemplate or, preferably, enjoy.

### **self-knowledge**

It is a hard saying, then, to state that the right place to start a good life from is the reality of our own self, the truth of our own nature or being. It is a more absolute saying perhaps than one about starting from faith in God or divine reality. But if it is hard it is also reliable and therefore trustworthy. The difficulty is in achieving it—some try and succeed, some try and fail, many never begin and therefore never have a chance to succeed. But the effort is worth making and the results are assured, as we can see if we look around us ; if we seek out those who achieve personal well-being (which is a broad way of saying “live good lives”) and see what it is about such people which marks them off from the rest of us.

I think we will find in every case that they have self-knowledge. By one means or another they have got beyond their self-pretences, they have freed themselves from bondage to the ways of the world, they have seen themselves clearly and whole and accepted their own self in its reality. The idea of acceptance may be the key to the matter. It is no use discovering the truth about our self only to reject it, only to want to be other than we really are. We build upon rock if we can discover

our own true self and accept it as the basis upon which our own life must be lived. From there we build, making stronger that which is good in us ; minimising and limiting, if we can, our weaknesses. Living is still a deliberate business, if you like " contrived ", but it is done from a basis of truth or reality and it produces something good.

### the heart of things

How do we find the reality of our self ? We must be open to every avenue of self-knowledge, by sharing our life with others, by communicating with others, by self-examination, by sensitivity to our motivations and fears, by being patient and courageous in the pursuit of truth within and without. We may seem to be back with the too easy answer which came to me first—that we each start from where we are or who we are—but it is not an easy answer if I change it to say that we each start from whom we *really* are—from the truth of self. We may not entirely succeed in establishing and maintaining this base for our own life but the effort is worthwhile for what we can achieve, and because every effort which ignores this starting point is ultimately futile. We may, however, achieve a full result—know and accept our self and, from that basis, make the most of our own particular life and achieve sufficient inner wisdom and strength to add something to the whole life of man through our relations with others.

We may even come to some perception and understanding of that human or divine spirit which many say is at the heart of things and is the centre or soul of each one of us. We may then know in ourselves the truth of those words from Galatians which I chose to end the silence this morning and, perhaps, the silence on every other Sunday of this new year. In my belief the right place to start from is the spirit of man which is a divine spirit for, indeed . . . " the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control . . . and . . . if the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course ".

## WHAT IS RELIGION ?

**W**HAT is religion ? The Unitarian report called *A Free Religious Faith* published in 1945 by the Lindsey Press, declares in its summary report: " In trying to state what we believe the essence of religion to be, we shall not attempt to add one more definition to the hundreds of definitions of religion already in existence. There are so many definitions because religion is so all-embracing and appears so interwoven in every aspect of life that any fully adequate definition is impossible."

Thus warned, we will avoid the temptation of quoting a series of definitions from others. The problem with definitions of religion is not only that there are so many of them but also that they are seldom, if ever, objective. Followers of religion produce definitions which sound like testimonials ; opponents of religion give us definitions which seem like condemnations.

What I want to try to do this morning is to look at religion first, outwardly or horizontally, and then, inwardly or vertically, and invite you to distil from these two processes your own answer to the question "What is religion?"

### **horizontally**

Looking outward, horizontally, across the life and world which we know, we see religion as a thing of many parts or aspects. Ideas, actions, institutions, errors, differences, symbols, mysteries, feelings, solitude, togetherness and so on. To enlarge a little: religion includes ideas, beliefs, explanations, answers. It claims to explain life to us, and ourselves to us, how to behave, the purpose of living, what happens after death—a body of knowledge is part of religion. Let us say "beliefs." Religion has for its form or framework institutions; places, organisations, government, finances, buildings, furniture—these and other things make up what is called organised religion, and most religion is organised. Religion issues forth in actions; the activity of worship, of teaching, of care, of reform: from both institutions and individuals religion finds expression in actions.

Religion (but not only religion) gives us symbols—crosses, tables, thorns, spires and many other things which point to something beyond themselves. Religion needs symbols; it tries to embrace the seen and the unseen of life, and the ordinary uses of language seem insufficient to express all that religion tries to say. A part of religion as we see it around us is mystery. It lays claim to knowledge beyond expression, truth above statement, about dimensions of life unseen, unmeasurable perhaps. It presents a view which is not bound by our normal understanding of space, time, quantity, and even quality.

### **errors and differences**

In individuals, religion has to do with feelings and emotions; some have asserted the existence of a specific feeling which can be called "religious." Not only the mind is involved in religion but also the heart. We can find plenty of evidence that religion is, in someone's phrase, "what a man does with his solitariness"

—its life is somehow inside the individual; its operation, for all its institutional structure, is internal, contained by the human spirit of individuals in their aloneness. But the other claim made for religion is that it has to do with human togetherness, it is involved in what happens between and among people, it draws them together, it keeps them together. Perhaps the derivation of the word religion with its meaning of "binding" has to do with this human togetherness. But there are other possibilities as we may see. From our own Unitarian point of view, a part of religion is error. It is not all truth, religion is not unchanging truth. And again, from our particular point of view, religion as we see it around us—looking outward to it, contains the element of differences. It does not consist of one set of beliefs, practices, symbols, scriptures and so on. There are many different sets and they do not agree with one another.

### **the work of men**

Seen in this way, religion looks like a very human activity, even invention. I think the basic Unitarian view is that, in virtually all its visible being, the parts or aspects I have just been describing, religion is the work of men, mankind. In any particular situation where it applies we are not likely to claim that some act or development is the work of God or the work of the Holy Spirit—as Christians, for example, often do claim. We will say it is the work of men, and we may add, inspired men or religious men; or some of us may say men inspired by the holy spirit. The difference is important. In every kind of religious activity we see chiefly the human element, whereas in many other kinds of religion, people see first the divine element. We see man and then deduce perhaps that God is using him; others see God at work and note that man is the means he uses for his divine purposes.

### **vertically**

And here we move to the other perspective and try to look at religion inwardly and, I think, vertically. What I am asking now is something about motivation, starting point; that which



brings about religion, causes its existence in the widespread, diverse character in which we have so far been looking at it. What is religion? now becomes six questions each of which represents a possible answer to the main question. Is religion man's response to his situation? Is it man's search for meaning and purpose in life? Is it man's *discovery* of God or the divine? Is religion man's *response* to God or the divine? Is it God's *revelation* of himself in our world and life? Or is religion God's *activity* in our world and life? They are overlapping and linked questions. Let us take a closer look at them and begin to ask ourselves which of these ideas, if any, expresses our view of what religion is.

I think the statements are in rising order—hence the use of the word vertical to describe this way of looking at the basic question. So I would say that, at the very least, according to some people, including Unitarians, religion is man's response to his situation. Finding himself, finding his world and his place in it; he does the seeking and finding, and declaring of his condition, and his understanding of it, through that many-sided thing we looked at earlier called religion. He codifies his knowledge, expresses his valuations, relates to everything outside himself through the practice of religion and, preceding that, the construction of a religion. So religion is descriptive and expressive of the human condition.

If we go a step beyond that, as some people do, we would say that it is by and through religion that man searches for the meaning and purpose of his life and the life of his world. Religion, by this view, is not just about the "what" of existence it is about the "why." Man wants to know why, needs to know why, so he makes the search for meaning and purpose a major activity in his life and his religion is the means of it; it is the drive to search, the search itself and the fruits of it.

### the word God

But let's go a little further if we can—though some Unitarians will be unwilling or unable to do so. The next thought in religion is man's discovery of God. I am going to use the word

God for simplicity's sake. I mean a divine element or quality or dimension or reality—something other than our humanity; and rather than say all that over and over again I will say God and trust you not to see an old man with a beard somewhere up in the sky. It is a view of religion held by some Unitarians and some others that we are not just driven to ask 'why' about life; we are called or driven to find some absolute reality, ultimate meaning, which I am calling God. Through the sciences we seek the why about the reality of ourselves, and our planet and our universe. Through religion, according to this view, we seek something more, something different, which is there to be found by us. Religion is our way of seeking that which waits to be found and which is, somehow, the key to life.

Those who go thus far usually want to add something more. Religion they say is not just the process of discovering God, it is the process of responding to God when we have made that discovery. There are many ways in which this can be said. Some talk of our response to the ultimate, others describe our service to God, doing the will of God and so on. However it is said, I go this far at least in my own view of what religion is, and I know that other Unitarians also do so.

### a divine initiative

But there are two more possibilities to consider. There is the view that religion is the expression of God's revelation of himself to us. Now the personal pronouns enter in, which bother some people and some Unitarians, but let them be there and de-personalise them if you must. We are now at the view of religion which says that the initiative is not human but divine, that God brings religion into being by revealing himself to men. Men have to house that revelation when they receive it, so they construct a way of describing it, they formulate ways of expressing their valuation of that revelation, they find ways of communicating with the author of it, they find themselves bound up by that revelation into a certain way of life. So we have

religion with its beliefs, churches, worship, prayer, way of life, and all the rest. God, the divine, is the originator of religion ; man is the builder of the house of God in our world.

This is the view of religion in those traditions where a revelation of God is the well-defined basis of the faith, whatever it is. This is not the Unitarian position ; so this is not a view that we can clearly and simply hold. Some of us hold it in a qualified or diminished sense, I think. We seek and find the Divine Reality and then find ourselves convinced that the initiative to seek and find was, in fact, the presence of that divine reality within us—God in us seeking God and finding him—so that at a personal, individual level we think of God as revealing himself again and again to mankind, through countless situations ; and then religion has to be thought of as God's thing—the thing given to man, though he has to seek it out and claim it for himself.

#### divine action

Finally there is the broader thought that religion is the vehicle of God's action in man's world—not just the way in which he shows himself to man but the way in which he acts, whether through the natural order as some think, or outside it, as others claim. Those who hold this view of religion are the people or churches quick to claim that something is the work of God when we might think of it as the work of men.

Somewhere on this graph, so to speak, you should be able to plot your own position—provide your own answer to the question "What is religion?" On the horizontal side—religion is ideas, institutions, actions, symbols, mystery, feelings, solitude, togetherness, differences, errors. On the vertical side religion is man's response to life, search for meaning, discovery of God, response to God ; God's revelation to man, God's activity in man's world. Our individual answer—which is our right and duty as Unitarians—has to be true for our own life and for the life to which we belong.

## WHAT IS GOD ?

**I**N his book *An Unfettered Faith* published in 1955 by the Lindsey Press, A. P. Hewett (a contemporary Unitarian Minister) describes development in the Unitarian belief in God like this: "Broadly speaking, the Unitarians of an earlier generation shared the general conception of God as it was set forth by Jewish and Christian teachers. They argued for the unity of God . . . they argued for the moral nature of God. By the middle of the 19th century Unitarian ideas about the nature of God had settled down to an avowal of faith in 'the Fatherhood of God' . . . But there were other Unitarian thinkers at that time who were pioneering the way towards a complete restatement of the whole position. They were alarmed at the extent to which fatherhood had become a frozen metaphor which could resist man's approach to the thought of the divine . . . Theodore Parker habitually spoke of 'Our Father and our Mother' . . . others tended to emphasize that 'God is a Spirit'. Ralph Waldo

Emerson was one of the notable exponents of this line of thought . . . He wrote 'When we have broken our God of tradition and ceased from our God of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence.' James Martineau wrote in similar terms . . . 'Every man's Highest, nameless though it be, is his living God, while, oftener than we can tell, the being of whom he hears at church is his dead God'."

### a crucial question

Not many years after that was written, the interim report called *Unitarian Theology in 1964* was published, and in its first section entitled "The Idea of God" we find this: "There is now a widespread feeling that what are called traditional ideas of God are outmoded—and this feeling clearly extends beyond our own community . . . A basic part of the problem lies in the quest for a concept of God that will meet both intellectual and devotional needs. We might possibly achieve the latter without the former. In the past, we have always laid great stress on the concept of a God to whom worship may be offered and prayers directed, and with whom it is possible to come into communion. A crucial question, which we may have to face, is whether this is any longer possible. It is certainly difficult to see how prayer and worship can be justified if traditional ideas of God are rejected entirely. But if we are to retain the idea of God, we of all people must obviously be the first to recognise (as G. K. Chesterton once affirmed) that the blackest infidelity of all ' . . . is the infidelity of those who regard God as an old institution'."

Two years after that was written the report called *Unitarians Discuss their Faith* summarised the grassroots response to those statements thus: "We Unitarians think of ourselves as believers in God, but there are many different concepts of God among us and we attribute to God a great variety of qualities. We find that the source of our knowledge of God is both intuition and reason. It is knowledge derived from inward and outward experience, from thought and feeling. It is knowledge to be checked, refined and explained by the use of reason. We

recognise that it may be better to say too little than too much when speaking of divine things."

### our own scene

All that comes from our own scene—the British Unitarian scene—and if we are part of that scene we ought to be able to place ourselves within it. But before we do that, here is one more quotation, from an American Unitarian—Charles White McGehee—in a book of meditations published in 1969. He wrote: "Bishop Robinson of the Anglican church has asked, 'Can a truly contemporary person not be an atheist?' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran martyr to the Nazis, said 'Jesus is a man for others and we are called to suffer with him in a godless world.' Dr. Thomas Altizer, Episcopal professor at Methodist Emory University, says that mankind now stands in an " 'apocalyptic situation'—midway between the collapse of all previous religion and the advent of a new humanity . . . A religion lives through constantly dying. In the western world, perhaps not enough has died to keep the cycles of growth recurring . . . The new theologians are divided in their godcepts (concepts of God). But in their various ways they are indicating that whatever direction religion takes it must be grounded in man—his predicament and his promise."

I have chosen my quotations from a mass of material but I think that they provide a picture which many of us will find to be an illustration of our own personal experience with the idea or reality of God. We were brought up on the traditional Jewish-Christian image of God the Father. It has become, or sometimes been, or been in some measure, a frozen image for us—not always representing a living God—the living Highest in our lives. We have tried other thoughts of God—Spirit, Father/Mother, light, fire, highest, nameless; and by this means we have been able to go on thinking of ourselves as God-believers. We have found perhaps that the God of worship—or the changing images of God in our worship here—do not lie easily with the God of our mind. The intellect is satisfied by one idea of God, the heart by another. We may have lost

the sense that God is, and that our task is to find and understand and serve that God. We may have adopted, instead, the view that man is the measure of all things, even of God or gods, and that therefore we have a choice about believing in God or not.

### **many different answers**

All these possibilities I find reflected in our own small community—in the discussions we have from time to time, in the things people say to me in private and the things not said—and in the tension there is between what is offered in worship and what is received. If I were to stop now and ask each of you to give an answer to the question What is God? I am sure there would be many different answers and perhaps a majority of 'don't know's'. But that would not mean that a majority of us want to lead Godless lives—lives without the thought or reality of God. It would mean that the doubts and confusions of our time touch us—even us—even here—and find us stranded on a sandbank of speculation and need, away from the dry land of traditional belief which we once knew and enjoyed. I am sure that you would be glad if I could answer the question What is God? in some simple clear way that satisfied both your mind and your heart. You would be even happier if you could feel that everyone else here was also satisfied by that answer. I would be happiest of all if I could do it but I know that, in these times, I cannot—and by now, in this sermon, you know that too!

But you will want me to say what God is and I must therefore try, although I share that Unitarian view expressed earlier that it is better to say too little than too much about God, and the thought of Eckhart and some others that it is safer to say what God is not than what God is.

### **three-in-one reality**

I start from the belief that there are absolute values of truth, beauty and goodness; that when we have made and imagined all that we can of truth, beauty and goodness they must be measured by some absolute self-existing truth, beauty and goodness. These three are not in fact separable, they hang together,

they inter-relate, inter-depend, in thought and experience, so I may think of them as one—one reality, not dependent for existence on human thought and experience and achievement. There is a careful argument which says that such a belief implies the existence of God, but I take a shorter route and believe that this three-in-one reality is my highest and therefore my God. I find this belief in truth, beauty and goodness in other people and other generations, in Plato's writings and elsewhere, and so I can feel that I share this belief with many others. All this combines thought and feeling. It is not just a theory which attracts me, it is a belief which comforts and inspires me. If it was uniquely my own I would have a hard time to sustain it. I would have to think that it all came subjectively out of my needs. But I share this belief with many others, in other generations and other traditions far back into history and that gives it more power and sufficient objectivity for me.

But I start also from an upbringing in the Jewish-Christian tradition, and from there I have derived images and emotional connotations which I can relate satisfactorily to later thought and experience. For some reason, I derive much from Jewish thought. The Living God of the Old Testament is not a literal figure in my belief, but cleared of the imagery which time has eroded or destroyed there shines through, again, a reality which I cannot deny; a highest which I accept gladly as the cornerstone of my life. The father-image of God is not at the centre of my belief but sometimes I can use it like poetry and it evokes something real and true in my idea and sense of God. It did become a frozen metaphor but as something not central to belief it finds an unfrozen place now. It is from Judaism, direct and filtered through a Christian upbringing, that I derive belief in a living God—a power, a force, an influence to which I have to relate my life as best I can. I cannot live as though it does not exist; for me it does, and so I must relate to it in thought and word and deed and feeling as best I can. I must find words to speak about this God (and you have heard some of them), I must relate behaviour to it, I must respond emotionally to its presence or reality.

## within the process

God is, in my belief, truth, beauty and goodness bound up together and active or (more emotionally) alive. I have to try to see active how? and active where? In my own life certainly I can see how and where, and I find many signs of God active in the life of man, in history and here and now. This God, by being, sets standards of thought and behaviour, provides meaning and purpose for living, gives confidence therefore and comfort. Whatever men do or do not do, in the end, it seems, this God continues to be and to do and therefore seems to me much greater than anything I or anyone else has thought up or created through feeling; or indeed actually needs.

Such a God is so marvellous in so many ways that one wants to communicate, to stay close, to follow, to understand and, not least, to rejoice. So there is place for prayer in some form that rings true, for referring work and play and relationships to this God, for devotional and spiritual exercises which keep one close to God as much as possible; for thought and discussion and the reference of this belief to increasing knowledge of life so as to understand more precisely the being of God; and not least there is room for worship through which to rejoice that God is.

Presupposed in much that I have been saying is the understanding that God is within the process not outside. Truth, beauty and goodness combined and active within the life we know. Certainly within the life of man as I see it, perhaps within the life of the universe (logically it must be so but I do not see that so clearly) and certainly, I find this God in myself—active in me, when I allow it and sometimes when I do not.

So I can say to you, as one Unitarian, that God is absolute truth, beauty and goodness, active in the world and in people, in you and in me. What, I wonder, is your answer to the same question? What is your "highest"? What things, as *Theologia Germanica* has it, "as they exist and are done and loved, known, tasted and felt within you" make you blessed, as I am blessed?

## GOD AND PRAYER

**M**Y argument is that prayer is a word with its own meaning and that is a meaning which implies some idea of God or belief in God. The simple dictionary definition of prayer is that it is a "solemn request to God or to (the) object of worship". To pray—according to the same source—is to "make devout supplication to God or the object of worship". The word has been given many extended meanings—going as far as St. Basil's notion that "our whole life (may) become a ceaseless and uninterrupted prayer". Some of these extended meanings of prayer may be covered by other words—meditation, contemplation, introspection, communion, worship, spiritual experience.

But it is the central thing I wish to examine because it seems to be a problem to many people today or even the avenue via which some people dismiss religion altogether. Few perhaps have a private devotional life which can be related to prayer as we have it in our services. So prayer in our services becomes a strange rather than a familiar thing ; even an uncomfortable thing if we are not sure what it is meant to be, and especially if we are not sure to whom, or what, it is directed. In our services these days all the real prayer—if I may call it that—is early in the service. It consists of the spoken prayer after the opening words and the prayer of Jesus which we sing after that. We have words to end the silence later in the service and words to end the service—the blessing—but these, I think are words of hope or aspiration addressed to ourselves and not prayer addressed to God. But hymns sometimes have the form and content of prayer—they are addressed to someone or something. We can perhaps take into our thoughts the awareness that some find hymns difficult in worship for the same reasons as they find prayers difficult.

### **modes of speech**

I am going to take some ideas of God and try to see what kinds of prayer they allow or encourage, but before that perhaps something has to be said about modes of speech. In other parts of our lives—outside churches let us say—we do not have too much difficulty intellectually over the practice some of us have of speaking to inanimate things. We may tell a golf ball how to go, or urge on a car in a race, or simply address ourselves to some object in admiration. Go straight, we may tell the ball—seriously enough. Go faster, we may tell the car. Come on, we may say to it if it is sluggish going uphill. You beautiful thing, we may say to a work of art or a flower or tree or lake or sky. Moreover, when we do this sort of thing, we personalise the object we speak to—or seem to do so. We call it “you” and we speak to it as we would to a person. If we were checked by a friend when we make these spontaneous

remarks to inanimate things we would not be “hung up” on the question of whether a car or ball or tree is a person. Of course not, we would say, it is just a manner of speaking.

We should not, I suggest, be too “hung up” on the manner of speaking which is prayer. By all means look at the content and see what it means but we do not necessarily have to reject the idea of prayer because there are personal pronouns in it.

### **a personal God**

But to begin to relate ideas of God and prayers: first we can see that where there is a belief in God as a father-figure or as a super-person or as a friend or ruler, the personal manner of speaking is deliberate and logical. Moreover, in prayer to such a god it is proper to confess things, ask for things, use intimate language ; have one half of a conversation with the expectation that the person (God) at the other end of it can and will reply. There are kinds of religion which say confidently that God answers prayer and some of them mean that literally while others are using metaphorical language. In the context of this idea of a personal God we should recognise perhaps that in the Christian tradition the identification of the historical human figure of Jesus with the personality of God helps to sustain the practice of prayer as a conversation with another person.

### **force or power**

Suppose we think, or feel, or believe God to be a force or power—a spiritual resource within the life process—which it is helpful or important or necessary for us to be aware of and with which to have some kind of relationship. Prayer then has a place as our means of communication with that force or power which draws from us feelings of awe and wonder, as some thing of great beauty or goodness might do. We look for a way to voice these feelings and find it is not enough to speak *about* this spiritual reality, saying that it is marvellous or reassuring or the greatest reality we have seen in this life.

We are moved to *address* it directly and fall into the mode and language of prayer. We may use the same kind of language we use to speak to a person, but as we do it we know that it is we who endow that spiritual reality with some of the qualities of a person in our desire or need to address it. The language is personal, but the object addressed is not a person. Some would then say that we pray to no more than a concept created in our own minds, but I make the assumption that in this situation we pray to a reality, a real spiritual force or power or spirit, but not to a person; for all that we use some forms of personal language. After all our language is formed for communication between persons and if we are moved to use it to speak to God it brings with it its own personal qualities. What we can usefully say to an impersonal God is essentially "Give us more of yourself". We cannot *use* God—this kind of God—for our own ends; we can only "pray to God for God". It seems to me that it is only that feeling, that need, which brings us to the wish to pray to that kind of God.

To sum up so far: personal language is bound to be the language of prayer but it does not mean that the only kind of prayer is to converse with a personal god. Prayer to an unchangeable impersonal god will also seem personal and it will, as Kierkegaard says, not change God but change him who prays.

### **an indwelling spirit**

But the next problem may be for some the sense or belief that God is not outside us to be spoken to as we speak to another person but rather an indwelling spirit; a divine spirit within us and therefore seemingly part of our self and not to be spoken to as we speak to other people. Here, I think, we have to consider what we mean when we say that God or the holy spirit is within us. I do not think it can mean that we create God within us so that we possess God as we possess arms and legs and the powers of thought and speech. And I do not

think we can believe in God within us in any sense which assumes that he is in some human beings but not in others. It has to be an idea of, or belief in, a universal indwelling divine spirit and the words universal and divine combined give us a basis for recognising the *otherness* of God—the belief that divine and human meet in a person or among people but that two orders of being are represented in such a meeting. The divine is not a part of the human; we can more easily think that the human is part of the divine.

If God who is in us is other than us, we have a basis for prayer as speaking to God. We have a hymn which I would be glad to sing every Sunday (and perhaps every weekday also) for it so exactly expresses the way one speaks, or wants to speak, to the indwelling universal divine spirit. It begins "Thou Life within my life, than self more near" and if you want to think more about prayer in relation to belief in an indwelling God the whole of that hymn is well worth studying. It brings out most clearly the idea of God within the self, and yet not a part of the self, and yet more important than the self. I am not saying you ought to believe that but rather that if you do believe that then prayer can have and should have a real part in your devotional life.

### **absolute values**

There is perhaps another idea of God which also allows the use of prayer, if the personal mode of prayer is accepted for what it is and if the otherness of God (whether within, around, above or beneath us) is also accepted. For some, God is the word which embodies a sense of absolute values of Truth, Beauty and Goodness and at first glance it seems false or foolish to speak out loud or even in the heart to such abstract things (seemingly) as absolute values. But as a way of relating to such values prayer in words has a part to play, as much as the endeavour of deeds; and I find no incongruity in that prayer of Vivian Pomeroy's which we sometimes share which begins "Thou truth who remainest sure when sense deceives; Thou

love who livest still when passion dies ; Thou beauty who makest all things new . . . ” and ends by saying “ we should not seek thee, had we not already found thee ”.

### a devotional life

Setting aside, then, the idea of God as a person there are other ideas of God more acceptable to our reasoning minds, though never to be possessed by irrefutable proofs. If we come to one of these ideas of God and find something in our experience which seems to correspond to it we are bound to want to embark upon a devotional life. We will have found a pearl of great price, a reality of supreme importance to us, something by which life gains purpose or security or makes sense. We will want to find ways of keeping aware of or growing more aware of this great thing, and prayer can be such a way ; indeed ought to be such a way. But to give it its good and useful place in our lives we may have to unlearn traditional or Sunday-school ideas of prayer which cannot be related to our sense of the divine ; and work our way past these obstacles of the personal qualities of speech and the indwelling or abstract nature of God before we can use prayer in helpful and meaningful ways.

In distress we may use prayer to ask for some particular thing to happen and in doing so we may be helped by the act of prayer over some moment of desperation or despair, and afterwards to a clearer sense of reality ; but as the experts in prayer in many traditions have been telling us for many centuries, true prayer asks only for more of God, a better or truer or fuller sense of the divine reality. That is what heart and mind desire when they become aware of God, and that is what, in the end, helps us to live better lives and make a better world.

Prayer makes no sense without some sense of God but God can be felt and understood in many different ways ; and whatever our belief in God may be, some kind of prayer is possible, and indeed necessary, for a full spiritual life.

## JESUS IN RELIGION AND HISTORY

**T**HIS sermon title, the third in a series of four suggested by the Unitarian Theological Panel, contains certain assumptions. It assumes that there was a man called Jesus, that he lived at some time in human history, and that he is something else, or something more, in religion that he was as an historical human being. On the one hand, rationalists and humanists may want to question whether this man ever really lived. They may also want to question the reality of his place in religion. On the other hand, traditional Christians may object to us considering a man as a man whom they regard as being God disguised as a man. So the Unitarian position regarding Jesus, who came to be called the Christ, is a middle one between the denials of rationalists on the one hand and the assertions of faith of traditional Christians on the other.



We see Jesus as a man, born into the world as a child in the way we are all born, after being conceived in the way we are all conceived—so far. This is an historical view of him. A comparable religious view of him tells us that he was miraculously conceived through a relationship between God and a woman or between a representative of God—angel or holy spirit—and that woman. The religious view further tells us that this child's birth was foretold and that miraculous events attended his birth and served to confirm that this was no ordinary child, but Almighty God coming into the world in a human form.

### all imagination and deduction

As we follow the normal child born into a normal family at a certain time in the history of the Jewish people (then in subjection to the Roman Empire), we lose sight of him for all his growing up. We have some idea of where he lived and what his father did for a living, the Jewish religion they practised, the size of the family and the general circumstances of life at that time. From all this we can imagine the kind of childhood and growing up which the child Jesus might have had ; but it is all imagination and deduction ; there is not a single historical fact about that part of his life. A religious view of the same years offers us, among other things, a list of his ancestors for many generations back ; a story of the child being taken to another country to avoid persecution ; a story of a boy showing precocious knowledge and behaviour in the Temple at Jerusalem when taken there by his parents ; and the statement that his mother had some inner knowledge that he was a special child with a special destiny. People who believe in this religious view of Jesus build much upon it and sometimes arrive at remarkably detailed accounts of his early life.

But we who concentrate on the historical person have to do without a biography of his first thirty years. Then we meet him as a wandering religious figure, somehow at odds with the traditional faith of his family and nation ; going about the country, not at all well-known, not much admired ; but slowly

gathering a handful of people about him as followers. Simple working people on the whole, a dozen men and some women. We have fragmentary records of him living that kind of life for not much more than two years, by which time he had quarrelled with his family, offended the religious people of his home town, and come to the notice of the Jewish authorities as at least a heretic and at most a "drop-out," to use a current expression. He seems to have based his life at that time on a direct, experiential faith in God, a faith expressed in worship and prayer, endowing him with deep sympathies and strong moral principles.

### no colleagues, only followers

There was some kind of relationship at the beginning of his life as a "religious" with a man of the same type called John. Whether he was a follower of John who went beyond his leader to follow insights of his own, or whether his life simply crossed John's life at some point or period, to their mutual enrichment, we cannot say for sure. But what we see after that experience is a man who had no human colleagues, only followers ; a man who established himself as a spiritual leader among a small number of people. We recognise him as a type who appears in human history from time to time and in one place or another—the type of person whom we may call a mystic, or a saint, or a great teacher.

The religion which grew out of his life and death says rather more of his few teaching, leading years. Religion says that he came with the power of God and the knowledge of God already in him, because he came from God, or came as God, to live among men. Therefore what he taught was not learned ; it was knowledge he had from the beginning. He chose to express it in Jewish terms because he was among Jewish people but he didn't learn it as other Jews learn it. He wasn't just kind and understanding among people ; he had miraculous spiritual power which he used to cure people of illness, to feed a hungry multitude, to raise a man from death to life again, to endow his followers with similar powers in lesser degree ; and to shape his life to a predestined end at a very early age.

### limited facts

Turning back to the historical view of Jesus, it has to be tentative on many points because historical, biographical facts are limited in relation to this man of nearly two thousand years ago. We think that he gradually developed spiritual knowledge and power through his relationship with God. He does not appear to have known from the beginning of his life as a spiritual teacher and leader exactly what his task in life was and what his end would be. But he seems to have lived under the influence of a Jewish belief current in his day that God would send a Messiah, a divine agent, to restore the life of the people of Israel who, while believing themselves to be a race specially chosen by God, were nevertheless living in subjection to Roman conquerors. This Jew Jesus, or his followers perhaps, gradually came to believe that Jesus was this heaven-sent saviour or Messiah. It was not the first or last time that some man or his followers came to that powerful conviction. In the case of Jesus it increased the devotion of his followers but caused disagreements among them as to how the Messiahship of Jesus would be expressed. Jesus himself seems to have reached an understanding of his role which was surprising and disappointing to all his followers while he lived. He decided that he might rescue Israel, spiritually if not politically, by his sacrificial death, so he did not avoid that possibility in his wandering ministry. He was plain and reckless in his teaching and in due time the authorities of his day, Jewish and Roman, combined to have him put to death by the common method of crucifixion.

The religious view of all this is that the death was pre-arranged by God to rescue or redeem all of mankind from the condition and consequences of sinfulness. Whatever Jesus thought, whatever his followers believed, whatever the authorities assumed and plotted and carried into effect—it was all part of a divine plan—God sacrificing his only son for the benefit of humanity; and in another sense, God himself dying painfully like a man for the sake of humanity. In the religious view, sacred and mysterious dimensions belong to the common execution of this man.

### a new religion

Turning back to the historical situation, the records seem to show that for the followers of Jesus his death on the cross was unexpected and shocking. At first they were utterly demoralised but quite soon they recognised something important and hopeful in that death. In their understanding, Jesus came alive again, perhaps came alive, really alive, to them for the first time. Their lives were utterly changed; they remained together, they continued the teaching of Jesus, and added to it their own burning convictions about his life and death. They, in turn, gathered followers and after a century or two a new religion began to grow, based on beliefs about Jesus as being God or from God, as being the fulfilment of prophecy, as having somehow overcome death and opened a door to heaven for all men.

So for many centuries our life has been dominated by the religious view of Jesus which began with the experience of his first followers. A great edifice of belief has been built upon those small foundations. Not by any means a strong or harmonious edifice of belief—because from the beginning men have argued about it, differed in understanding and interpretation, persecuted one another and terrorised others, for the sake of this edifice of belief in Jesus the Christ, the only son of God, the second person, or part, of a trinitarian view of God—father, son and holy spirit.

### a spiritual leader

Jesus in history is a great man of long ago—type of a greatness which appears in the human saga from time to time in some part of the world or another. A spiritual leader, a hero figure in whom we may invest our hopes and ideals for humanity, and through whom we may come to some deeper understanding of the God who was so real to him. From his teaching we may gather ethical insights of help in our own lives; from what we know of his manner of life we may receive challenges to good living, higher than we can meet. From the cause and manner of his death we may discover some universal truths about life

and about men ; and through the discovery of those truths we may ourselves learn how to live and how to die.

Jesus in religion is not as close to us and to our experience as that, despite the talk of traditional Christians about Jesus being "alive today" and about making a relationship with him ; and about his being "the man for others." In the religious view Jesus the Christ, is Jesus Christ, is Son of God, is God, is Christ, is Lord of Life, King of the Universe and so on. It is the divinity, even deity, of Christ which is the essence of the Christian Faith ; often overshadowing and even eliminating at times the humanity of the man Jesus who lived and died twenty centuries ago.

### so short a life

Jesus in religion is chained there by what James Martineau called "the incrustations on the original picture," and while from one generation to another and between one branch of Christianity and another the emphasis may change, Christianity must hold fast for its survival to the understanding of Jesus which came to his first followers after his death, which subsequently developed through the reflections and arguments of the early Christian fathers, and which was eventually fixed forever in the basic creedal statements of the Christian Church.

Mankind may survive and grow in wisdom without the Jesus of history. Mankind may survive and grow in wisdom without the Christian Church. But the Christian Church cannot survive without the Jesus Christ of religion which is its own creation. It may seem paradoxical, but the historical man of so short a life so long ago is more important to the life of all men than the particular religion, however large or old, which followed him. For the man's life reminds us of what some men in every age can become and there is continuing hope for all humanity in that ; but particular religions can only serve some people for some time. God at work through a man, any man, in the world is a greater power for good than God enshrined upon an altar in a church, any church.

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

"WHO stands his ground ? Only the man whose ultimate criterion is not in his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these things when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and exclusive allegiance to God. The responsible man seeks to make his whole life a response to the question and call of God." (from "After Ten Years" in "Letters and Papers from Prison" SCM Press, 1953).

The life of the man who wrote these words in prison at the end of 1942 rested upon religious experience. By that I mean that there was something in his life to which he could refer which he would have called the experience of God. He was

able to say that God was real to him ; he was able to hear both the question and call of God from time to time and this was the most important thing in his life.

Bonhoeffer grew up in circumstances which led to theology, learning and piety becoming a large part of his life. But he was also sportsman, teacher, musician, and a welcome friend to many. Somewhere along the way in his companionship with theology and piety a certainty was born. This was his kind of religious experience. We might say it belonged to the world of institutional religion—the world of worship, church life and sacred studies.

It was not a common way of life in his day and it is less so today. We must look to other circumstances if men and women are to meet with religious experience in their lives today. And there *are* other situations and other kinds of experience which can become religious experience. I want to survey some of them and then return to the question of what makes these particular experiences qualify for the general description “religious experience.”

#### **the processes of reason**

First, for some there is an experience of intellectual truth ; an experience of the mind ; an experience through the processes of reason. If we are prone to think about the meaning of life and equip ourselves to do it well by reading or studying or training or all three, we may be led deeper and deeper into reasoning about life and death, purposes human and divine, the nature of the universe, the questions of good and evil ; and by strenuous effort we may come to some conclusions which are our own (though others may arrive at them also), which give us satisfying answers to fundamental questions, and which seem secure from demolition by further thought. We may come to some concept of a Creator, or a Great Mind ; or our answers, our truth (for that is what it is for us when we reach it) may express itself in newer categories of thought altogether. What-

ever the answers, whatever the form they take, the experience of arriving at them is a tremendous achievement ; it feels like that ; we value it highly, we may want to cherish it in secret ; and it can be for those who have it a religious experience.

#### **an awareness of goodness**

Second, there is what I will call the experience of righteousness. If our life lies among those of people in need of help, be it material or medical or spiritual, we may come upon a knowledge or awareness of goodness or love or compassion which we recognise as surpassing all normal standards. It may be seen suddenly, or realisation may come to us slowly so that it is, as it were, in our presence long before we recognise it. It may be the care a mother gives to a child ; it may be the care a child gives to a parent. It may be the devotion of someone to the poor or outcast or the spiritual service of someone to those lost by wealth and plenty. It may be a political life—someone famous or someone unsung. There are situations in human experience when, in someone's life, goodness finds expression in a degree which evokes in us wonder and reverence. We recognise in it some universal quality, some greatness greater than the person who is the vehicle of it. You will perhaps leap to the conclusion that this is always seen in another person—and that may be how it is for us. But it can also sometimes be seen by the person whom that goodness is—so that one whom the world comes to recognise as greatly good may himself have that knowledge and be totally humbled by it. But we are more likely to be in the position of the receiver or the bystander when we see it, and the experience of recognising it and of being in the presence of such goodness can be for us a religious experience.

#### **the abundance of beauty**

A third possibility is the experience of beauty—in itself aesthetic experience—but potentially a religious experience also. Beauty appears in many forms in our lives. It comes to the ear through music and the spoken word ; it comes to the eyes

through countless forms of visual art ; it comes to the hand through textures and materials of many kinds ; it comes to the nose through country and garden and kitchen. Beauty comes inwardly, in ways most of us do not understand, to the creator of beauty in whatever form. And beauty comes totally to us sometimes through communion with the natural world or through a human encounter or relationship. Just to think this much of beauty recalls for me so much, so many kinds of experience, that I marvel inwardly at the abundance of beauty there is in our world and the power it has to move up in ways we can neither see nor explain. It may remain for us notable aesthetic experience but it may also become for us a religious experience.

### **the experience of worship**

Of those three categories I am sure—two I lay claim to in my own experience. There is at least one more possibility and I lay claim to it also but I am not sure whether it begins as a particular experience and then can become religious experience ; or whether it is a particular experience which is the outcome of religion. I mean the experience of worship—the experience we are sharing, or enjoying separately, this evening. It is a kind of art form—it can be an experience of beauty ; it has some intellectual content—it can be an experience of truth ; its theme is often that of goodness and love and the people who share worship are often good and loving so it may be an experience of goodness. But few of us come to worship without other experience behind us so it may be that worship is a secondary kind of religious experience—sustaining something we already have, renewing something we may have lost, enlarging something certain but insufficient. Having taken it into account, let us leave it there with some questions around it and face the question: What makes a particular kind of experience religious experience ?

### **the key of life**

My answer is this. A religious feeling or understanding of life has to do with the meaning of life and the meaning of life as a whole. To slip into traditional terms again for a moment,

religious experience as experience of God gives us the key of life. It may not answer every little question but it gives us some kind of abiding certainty about the shape and direction of things which enables us to live harmoniously and purposefully in the world. We know where we are going or we know that we can find out where we are going. God stands for order, power, control, harmony, in our understanding and feelings. If it were not so we would not recognise anything in the experience to call God.

Now, slipping out of traditional language again, the experience of truth or goodness or beauty becomes for us a religious experience when it gives us the key to life as a whole. When we say—through these conclusions I grasp the general nature of life and begin to understand my part in it ; we have a religious experience based upon the reasoning mind, which becomes the corner-stone of our life. Or again, when, in the presence of great goodness, our heart and mind respond with the thought that this shows us how life is meant to be, or the possibilities in it, or the truth of human living and relating ; so that we become committed to that perception and try to live by that light ; then we have a religious experience based upon the recognition of righteousness or goodness or love. And so with beauty also. If it gives us a vision to follow, or a hope to pursue, or a thankfulness to express, and we are engaged by the experience in a way which takes over the shaping of our whole life—then the knowledge of beauty becomes a religious experience for us.

### **the question and call of God**

I don't know how Bonhoeffer would describe his religious experience. He belonged to my generation and I know that mine is bound up with a gentle but consistent church upbringing. Somewhere along the way, after many vicissitudes it must be said, all the love and learning I experienced in church and family as a child came together with a knowledge of the world and self and made sense ; opened out a way to follow which, I,

like Bonhoeffer, would call "the question and call of God." His words are worth looking at again because they seem to me to have great precision.

He seems to say that we live properly by reason or principles or freedom or other things until, or when, our ultimate criterion becomes God. Translating that into the terms I have been using, sometimes an experience of truth or goodness or beauty can become the ultimate criterion in our life—if we will let it—and then, whether we call it God or not, it should have (and will have indeed) our exclusive allegiance. Whatever else has been our guiding star will be dropped, sacrificed, because of our commitment to this higher, more certain thing. Notice that he speaks of obedient and responsible action—he does not say that to follow the highest turns us into idiots or slaves. We remain responsible. Notice too that he says, "the responsible man seeks to make his whole life a response to the question and call of God." Again, "responsible" and "seeks to make" (we will not achieve perfection but we will be trying) and not least the "question" as well as the "call"—the ultimate criterion governing our life will question us as well as call us.

Of course, when we look at Bonhoeffer we are looking at an exceptional man ; and yet he could have been an unexceptional man like many others. Something called him, lifted him, sustained him, in a quality of life and death which will be long remembered and admired. It could happen to anyone, I believe, and what is more, it can happen in any one of a number of quite different ways.

## LIVING WITH DOUBTS

**W**HEN people come to me, as they sometimes do, and say, "I have doubts", the word has a particular meaning. They are saying that they have lost confidence in traditional Christian beliefs which they acquired in their growing up ; and they may be saying more specifically, that they have doubts about the nature and existence of God. One of the dictionary meanings of doubts is "inclination to disbelieve" and another is "calling into question" and it is doubts of this kind I am thinking about this morning. Many of us have had them, some of us still have them ; living with such doubts may be easy or difficult.

Kenneth Patton, whose words I read in the service this morning is, you might say, a Unitarian who made his doubts permanent! He is one of the best-known Unitarian humanists or humanistic Unitarians in America, and he has written many meditations and readings for use in his church which reflect a positive, constructive humanism. So, in the matter of doubts, which we in the Scotland of Knox and Calvin may regard negatively and with shame, Patton and others like him take a positive and approving line. Let's look at some of his words again and see how they apply to ourselves.

#### necessary machinery

"Doubt (he says) is the necessary machinery whereby our satisfaction with what we have is prodded and disturbed." That gives me a picture of someone comfortable with a belief in God being upset ; forced into questioning that belief by some doubt which has crept into his mind. That does happen—it may have happened to many of us—but I do not take it for granted that it is a good thing to happen. A particular belief in God may be sound, and to doubt it, or be led to doubt it, may be wholly unprofitable for the person concerned. In the case of people who commit themselves to some comprehensive form of religious belief such as fundamentalist Christianity a single doubt sometimes causes havoc and, indeed, may destroy the whole edifice of that belief. I have known people to whom that happened and for them it was a shattering experience. Looking on from the outside one might have said "Well it only shows what an unsound belief it was if it could be so shattered by a single doubt." But that would not make a virtue of the doubt or dissolve the intellectual suffering of the person to whom it happened. Patton is perhaps too satisfied with the condition of doubt itself ; approving a condition of scepticism as a normal way of life.

#### an age of doubt

"To doubt is to believe in the intelligence and inventive imagination of humanity . . . the only way we can justify the inheritance from the past is to improve upon it." Patton here takes a very modern attitude, I think. We live in an age of doubt in which it is thought proper to question everything, to disillusion ourselves about the past as much as possible. But I find myself contesting Patton's view again, with the thought that it may be arrogant of us to think that nothing from the past is perfect in itself, that everything is capable of improvement by us. Some things come to us from the past with such a weight of truth about them that we may justifiably accept them without serious doubts. Other things it is right to question, to have doubts about, of course.

It is particularly the case today that almost everything of religion is doubted because it is an inheritance of the past, and I am often amazed at the confidence with which people reject aspects of religion because they are from the past, with little or no real understanding of what they reject. I believe that there is a great deal of spiritual teaching from the past in various religious traditions which, if we trouble to study it seriously, and can relate it to our own experience, we will be glad to find to be true for us. To approach it sceptically, doubtfully, is to load the scales against achieving a true understanding of it. A sceptic, incidentally, is defined as "a person who doubts the truth of Christian or of all religious doctrines ; an agnostic ; a person of sceptical habit of mind." The last part of that definition contains the healthy reminder that there *are* habits of mind, and to doubt everything is one of them. To doubt may be classed as a disability when it is a habit, even though it is wise to be doubtful about some things sometimes.

#### destructive power

Turning to another thought altogether: Patton says ". . . a doubt is an idea that is still alive." How does that strike you, I wonder? Does it make you think of dead ideas and go on

to recognise that since there are many things we do not doubt there must be many dead ideas about! “. . . a doubt is an idea that is still alive.” It gives me another kind of picture—the familiar one of a cat playing with a mouse—playing with it for quite a time before killing it. Doubting sometimes seems a bit like that. We take some notion—say, some idea of God—and we play with it intellectually, we tease it, toy with it, push it and pull at it with questioning and examination until we have worn it out and perhaps destroyed it. Patton, and others like him, look at doubts as constructive things but that may be too idealistic a view; because what we often see in experience is the destructive power of doubting. By doubting some idea in this age of intellectual cleverness we seem able to demolish it—render it useless in our scheme of things—but that does not often seem to lead us on to the discovery of some conviction to take its place.

I remember a few years ago hearing of someone who was led by the Aberfan disaster to doubt their own belief in God. It must have been a belief in a God who could prevent such disasters either by some miracle of intervention or by silently and effectively working in the minds and hearts of the men in the situation. Whichever it was, that disaster called this person's belief into question in her own mind. The doubt became a certainty, a negative certainty in its own right. There is no God, there is no meaning in worship or church. So that person, by doubting, took something out of her life which had been important up till then and was not able to fill the empty space with something better—even a better belief in God.

### **doubts and rejections**

Humanism in these days rests on doubts and rejections. Doubts about God and traditional religion, and all religion; and the rejection of all of that, in favour of a belief in man. Sometimes it seems like a kind of halfway house of a philosophy of living. Humanists seem to believe in what is left when they have taken away the things they doubt and reject. God is removed and man is left and so we have a philosophy or religion

of man and his capacities. Here, doubts of a theological kind seem to me to diminish belief. I don't mean that belief in man is a lesser belief than belief in God; but that this kind of humanism shuts the door against every possibility of discovering and believing in any divine reality, and invites us to be certain about man; when, in truth, it is quite possible to have doubts about him which are quite as disturbing as our doubts about God.

These rather random reflections and observations seem to suggest certain conclusions. First, and obviously, doubts are a constant and real part of life. A life without doubts (and we can see it in some people) is so protected, cocooned, shut off, as to be unreal, untrue to life as a whole. For all of us there will be times of doubting, aspects of life to be doubted, ideas we will want to question. We needs must accept then that doubt is a part of true living and if we do that, we may relieve ourselves of feelings of shame or inferiority with respect to it.

### **how to live with them**

But having accepted that doubts will be some part of our life we have to learn how to live with them, and we have seen, I think, that there are various possibilities. We may take our doubts as they rise, explore them and resolve them by finding them justified or unjustified. If they are justified we have to abandon the belief we doubted, but if we find our doubt is unjustified we may take up the belief again. This is important especially in religion. To doubt is not to reject, it is to question, and the questioning may or may not lead to rejection. If in some circumstance we doubt the existence of God it does not necessarily mean we are finished with belief in God. If we handle the doubt coolly we may find that it clarifies our belief and does not destroy it. Some of us will doubt God a good many times in our life but find sound reasons to return to belief again and again; and we may find that we do so with more confidence for having experienced the doubts.



## the habit of doubting

We have seen also, I think, that in meeting the doubts which arise in our lives there is some risk of falling into the habit of doubting. We may become, as it were, addicted to doubt, because we find it hard to have confidence in anything or anyone, and because we live in an age which seems to make doubting a virtue. But to be an habitual doubter is to lose the power to discriminate between what is doubtful and what is certain. It is a bad habit and make life very troublesome for oneself and for others.

We have seen also the possibility that we may make certainties of our doubts. Again we have to recognise that to doubt is to *question*, not to decide. The questioning will lead to a decision—that the idea we doubted was erroneous or true—but without that process of questioning, what we call a doubt is really an unexamined conclusion—a new certainty which in turn it might be wise to doubt—and examine.

Finally, as to doubt and faith, we do well to see them as partners rather than as enemies. Paul Tillich wrote years ago that true faith includes doubt and most of us here will know the truth of that in our own experience. Faith which cannot stand examination is not a good basis for living because we are beings equipped to examine, to reason and we must do so. But doubt which will allow no place for faith is equally defective as a basis for living. Robert Weston, whose words we sometimes share here, has said “Doubt is the handmaiden of truth, the servant of discovery, a testing of belief . . .” and if that rings true for us it means that in our understanding life has, along with doubt, something called truth, something called belief, something to be discovered and believed.

## LONELINESS IN PLENTY

**T**HE word loneliness in my title needs no explanation. Loneliness is a universal quality of human existence—all of us are potentially lonely and sometimes alone. The word plenty is more ambiguous but I have used it to mean plenty of people, plenty of diversions, plenty of interests, plenty of possessions. We have created a way of living which is fully equipped to ward off our loneliness and yet from all sides we hear that loneliness is an acute problem in modern life—especially modern urban life.

When *Service of the Heart* was compiled by liberal Jewish scholars in the 1960s they decided to have a section of prayers and readings on special themes. Obviously they had to decide between some and others and their final list of twelve themes included loneliness. It is perhaps interesting to place it among the others. The series is: nature, omnipresence, quest, loneliness, trust, sincerity, righteousness, justice, revelation, Israel's mission, brotherhood, redemption.

### changing patterns

When some of us discussed recently "Living with Neighbours" the subject of loneliness not only came up but persisted throughout the discussion. We saw that there are changing patterns in city life which make our neighbours often less important to us than our workmates or the people we mix with in the social and interest groups to which we belong. But we saw also that a good many people seem to suffer too much loneliness because these patterns of living leave them out for one reason or another.

We hear a good deal these days (and have done for many years) about the loneliness of housebound elderly people. Schemes exist to provide them with visitors but the schemes never seem to keep pace with the need. Recently in London a campaign began to ease the loneliness of the increasing numbers of young people in bedsitters in that great city. It was made to sound like a new problem but perhaps it is only a larger problem than it once was—for I can remember vividly the loneliness of living in a bedsitter nearly twenty-five years ago a long way from London.

### feeling of being alone

There are these and other signs that while we are each and all in some sense and degree alone, feelings of aloneness which are painful or distressing appear to visit a good many people in modern life—sufficiently many for a problem to be seen and isolated and written about and even dealt with in some measure. And yet, as I said at the beginning, we have, instinctively perhaps, tried to build conditions of life which keep out loneliness—feelings of being alone. We have bunched together in larger and larger cities and smaller and smaller homes; we have replaced sprawling slums with highrise flats. We have tried to link everyone together with the common culture of radio and television and high circulation daily papers. Statistics give us figures in millions of those who watch Coronation Street and Val Doonican or some sporting event. Through the facilities of city life especially, we have many opportunities to meet and

mingle with other people in endless Sales, in evening classes, in holiday rushes and resorts, in entertainment and sport and the proximities of our working lives.

But for some people, perhaps many people, it doesn't work, or it doesn't work for enough of the time. Loneliness is recognised as a social problem requiring study and research and special lines of action. Why? There seem to me to be both inward and outward causes. It is our nature as self-conscious beings to be able to feel our individuality, our separation from everyone else. In some situations we are made acutely aware that we are alone—in pain, in bereavement, in moments of decision. All this is natural to us and most of us can cope with our aloneness much of the time. We should note in passing that most of us sometimes demand to be alone—so much is it a part of our nature that we have a need for solitude which we have to satisfy sometimes. But this perhaps shows us that one of the inward causes of loneliness is a fear of our aloneness, our individuality. Some of us take steps, either calculated or desperate, to merge our life with the life of others, to blur the barrier which separates us from others because we and they are individuals. If we do this—live in and through others—we do not learn to live alone and then, if circumstances separate us from those others, we may well be overcome by loneliness and know of no way to assuage those feelings.

### untrusting

More simply, loneliness may have as an inward cause our inability to relate ourselves to other people. This may mean that we do not find it easy to be interested in other people, to mix with them, to talk with them, to give something of ourselves to them, to trust them, to love them, to lean on them or allow them to lean on us. There is a whole range of situations there which can be seen in modern lives. These circumstances indicate that within ourselves we are untrusting or fearful or selfish, for one cause or another. Sometimes it is necessary to search out and remove these causes before we can overcome the fears or lack of trust or the selfishness which produce our

loneliness. But at other times the causes may be accepted and the disabilities overcome by some effort born of the need to feel more at one with other people. That may seem a hard teaching for those who suffer in this way, but the corollary of it is that all of us can do something about loneliness by remembering that there are these inward causes and problems to overcome. If we *do* remember that, we will perhaps more readily take the first step when we can, speak the first word or offer the first deed which may break down someone else's loneliness and, in turn, our own. It may be true to say that the *chief* causes of loneliness are inward—conditions of the self which, when related to the fact that we *are* each alone, produce feelings of sadness, isolation, distress, fear, which are not easily overcome from within.

### the people next door

But there may be outward causes also which create or increase loneliness. In our discussion on living with neighbours some of us found that geographical proximity—living side by side or in the same street—no longer always shapes the pattern of relationships which we all need to support us. We may hardly know our neighbours in the street because they and we make real friendships elsewhere—through work or interests which we do not happen to share with the people next door.

We may be in a slow period of change in this respect which results in some people being at a loss when they find no friends in the area into which they have moved to live. They come with old expectations or no means of following the new pattern. For example, a mother with young children is tied to home for some years and cannot work or follow interests elsewhere which will bring her friends. She needs to find them in homes and shops and clinics close to where she lives, and whether she can do that or not will depend on her inward qualities and upon the will and concern of the people in her district.

Mobility of life which causes people to move from place to place more often than we used to, in the search for better work or more pay, is an outward cause of loneliness for some people.

Husbands may find readymade opportunities to overcome these feelings in the challenge of new work and the presence of new colleagues—but even here it may be made difficult by the attitudes of those already established in that place and that work. Wives find it more difficult because there is no readymade situation to help them with their loneliness, unless the new neighbourhood happens to have a pattern of welcome for the newcomer, or unless the wife happens to be a strong, outgoing person willing to seek out and pursue relationships which she needs.

### helps and cures

We could go much deeper into the causes of loneliness both inward and outward, but if I have sketched an outline situation, we might go on to consider what helps and cures may be available to us for loneliness which needs some help or cure.

The Jewish material which I read earlier gives us the thought that in loneliness we can turn with some confidence to God. Many will quickly dismiss that thought today but we should not do so without serious consideration. For it is a fact of life that lonely people have often turned to God and found their loneliness eased or overcome as a result. What does that mean? It means that if one believes that there is a constant power or spirit present in life with which, or with whom, a man can relate his being; then, when one feels too much alone, one can turn confidently to that constant power, make some kind of contact or relationship, and break down the solitude which was fearful or distressing. If one believes that with that spirit or power the relationship is somehow a channel of love—that love flows from man to God and from God to man—then to turn to God is like turning to another person—but with the added advantage that the response of God will be certain and sure. If one believes that through that spirit or power, wisdom is given, then to turn to God does not just relieve present loneliness but shows a way to prevent it being a problem in the future. I am sorry that so many people today dismiss this dimension of help, for there is a great deal of evidence as to its value in the past, and

no reason, except our cleverness, to suggest that its value will be any less in the present and the future. We may have a secret life with God which enables us to have a better life with our fellowmen.

### other help

But let us ask what other help and cure there may be, in this generation which says that God is dead. There is the help of knowledge—both self-knowledge and the awareness of the prevailing conditions of life around us. I have outlined some of that knowledge I hope, and if we keep it by us it will help us with our own loneliness and perhaps enable us to help others.

First, the knowledge that we are all, by our very nature, prone to loneliness. That means that if you are not lonely now the person next to you may be ; that if you have not come here out of loneliness, someone else has done so. So when we are not lonely we can help by being aware of others and quick to speak and act, in case that will help. It may not be needed this time or next time but the risk is worth taking to help to create some pattern of contact and communication wherever we are, which will be there to help us when we need it and to help others when we don't. Some will recognise that this is my particular notion about something which is needed in modern life. A basic framework of communication and contact—people knowing one another and speaking to one another at casual and superficial levels, so that the ground is already prepared when we need more of others or they demand more of us.

So there is not only the help of knowledge but also the help of will—being willing to accept that there is a problem of loneliness which might touch anyone, even us ; and therefore being willing to do what we can to assuage and solve it. And that means some increase in trust—trust in ourselves and in others. It can only come gradually, and it can only come through experience, whether it be trust in ourself, trust in other people or trust in the unseen God. To be alone is to be human, to be lonely is to need others, as others, being human, need us.

## WE BELIEVE IN FREEDOM

**F**REEDOM is a notion very dear to the hearts and minds of those who call themselves Unitarians ; but why do we set such a high value upon it and how far does our approval of freedom extend ?

As to the why of it, the first simple answer is that we value freedom because, in some degree, we need it. We are people who, in religion at least, want freedom to think for ourselves, freedom to organise our church life as seems best to us, and so on. Whether we are born as Unitarians or become such, we need freedom in some degree and when we find it in our particular kind of religion we set a high value upon it.

### **a liberating element**

But behind that there must be some beliefs about man and God which lead us to think that we are entitled to some freedom and able to use it and benefit from it. For some there will be a belief that God gives freedom to man, to us ; that, without being deeply philosophical or theological, it is part of the true nature of things that we human beings have freedom and benefit by having it. We do not think of men as puppets of some mastering deity ; we acknowledge with gratitude that there is a God "in whose service is perfect freedom". This kind of Unitarian belief leads us to give freedom a central place in human life. Others among us may have the belief that there is that of God within us and that this divine element in our being is a liberating element—it makes for freedom in those men and women who acknowledge the presence of God in their own lives. Again it can be said that in the service of God there is perfect freedom, but now it has reference to an indwelling spirit in man. We see a kind of proof of this view in the freedom of spirit displayed by such men and women. We may take Jesus as an example and say that he was never overcome by the world, never subservient to any person or institution or government, but that he was a free man showing us the freedom that belongs to all the sons of God.

There is also a view among us, I suppose, which finds a humanistic basis for our belief in freedom. This basis may suggest that man is an independent creature by nature free from dependence upon any divine reality. It may go on to say that through his self-consciousness and his power to reason man can have personal freedom and that it is his destiny to attain such freedom. It may follow from this view that man will therefore enshrine freedom in his institutions, in his government, his society and so on.

In one way or another then, Unitarians can find a theological or philosophical basis for this belief in freedom, which spares them the necessity of basing their high valuation of freedom on their own need of it alone. But I want to suggest that in our

application of freedom to life we operate more with reference to our needs perhaps than to our theology.

### **the social context**

If we look at the social context of our lives in just three of its aspects we may see that we Unitarians vary in the value we place upon freedom in these fields. We vary as to the fields and as to our own opinions. In the business of government we are, in general, supporters of parliamentary democracy, whereas we may be anarchists in church life! We are, in general, supporters of the party system in politics and, these days, even in local government. If not active supporters, we passively accept this framework of government and politics with all the limitations on the freedom of the individual which it imposes. In general, we accept the idea of centralised government more readily than we accept centralised control of our churches, for which we expect a high degree of self-government—a large measure of freedom to govern themselves.

Into financial and economic matters I dare not venture very far but it seems to me that Unitarians are not of one mind about the degree of freedom which should obtain in these fields. We may not even be very interested in freedom for trade or freedom to make money or freedom to buy and sell.

In the field of education, again, we may be on the side of disallowing parents (for the common good of course) to decide where and how their children will be educated. We may be in favour of a very large measure of authority for teachers with regard to what is taught, how it is taught and how it will be learned! Freedom is a very frail plant indeed in the world of education and, whatever our theology of freedom may be as Unitarians, we may avoid applying it fully or at all in such an area of life as this. In general my argument is that our belief in freedom is not so strong or so clear that it finds equal application through our lives in every part of life. Indeed we may accept a great deal in life without ever referring it to our belief, our central belief let it be said, in freedom.

## **organised religion**

If we change our perspective and look at the scene of organised religion we see a higher degree of concern among us for freedom, or a closer application of our beliefs to realities. In this case the realities of church and denominational life. As I have said, traditionally, we demand autonomy for local churches such as this. We claim for them the right to manage their own affairs entirely. Purely for reasons of expediency our independent congregations are gathered into a General Assembly and do some things together because it is more efficient than to do them separately. This kind of freedom is very very important to us, traditionally, but we see our central body growing stronger as our churches grow weaker I think, and that suggests that either we are departing from our belief in this kind of freedom, or that we no longer have the strength to apply it to our own ecclesiastical situation.

We are certainly clinging more resolutely to the idea of freedom from official creeds and statements of belief. While the Church of Scotland discusses the idea of formulating a new creed we stand back and congratulate ourselves upon having had freedom from formal creeds and statements for more than a hundred years. From time to time there are some voices among us asking for a statement of what we believe, and immediately there is a fearful reaction from those to whom freedom of belief in Unitarian churches is supremely important. It has to be said that this reaction is so sharp as to suggest that the defenders of freedom may be reacting rather more out of their need than their belief. Within our churches we practice a democratic form of government. In some congregations it is for ever under challenge from freedom-conscious individual members; in other places either trust or indifference allow it to exist calmly.

## **individual circumstances**

It is when we come to the circumstances of the individual that we see the Unitarian belief in freedom most sharply etched. Intellectual freedom in religion is the field (the comparatively

small field) in which there is no doubt that our belief in freedom is operating. If I were to say to you now that you must believe this thing I have just declared because I have declared it, many of you would immediately become resistant to the idea and alarmed that your freedom of thought in religion was somehow being curtailed.

It may be true that some Unitarians value greatly their freedom from traditional beliefs and the pressures of conformity attached to them; but it is also true, by observation, that Unitarians instinctively react against any move which might limit their freedom to believe that which their own heart and mind approves and which their own conscience will certify. Freedom of thought in religion is the chief working out in life of the Unitarian belief in freedom. If we believe that our powers of reason are important for the world's good and that religious beliefs are also important for the whole life of man, then we do not have to apologise for this intense concern for freedom of thought in religion.

But I think we have to be careful to see that it is not easy to have or to hold. When we have escaped the threats to such freedom offered by authoritarian religion or authoritarian government, there are still threats to it which come from within ourselves. I am by no means sure that we Unitarians recognise these threats or take them seriously enough. Our trust in reason dates back to a time when much less was known about emotion than is known today. We believe too easily in our power to think freely if we fail to recognise our emotional chains. The human impulse to think freely is indeed a most precious thing, to be firmly defended, fully used; but the power to think freely has to be won by each of us and may never be perfectly realised in most of us.

## **a free person**

We must come back then, in the end, to our theology or philosophy for it holds out to us not merely, or not only, the possibility of personal freedom of thought in religion but the

possibility of becoming and being a free person. This kind of freedom is the greatest and if we have lived long with that famous phrase "in whom is perfect freedom" we will recognise that it has reference to a truly free person. Someone who is not dominated by his own thoughts or feelings or the condition of his own flesh, let alone dominated by external influences stemming from the life around him. If we have looked in experience at that saying about "overcoming the world" we will know that this is another way in which religion describes the free person. If we have ever known, "that peace which passes understanding, which the world can neither give nor take away," we will have known, even fleetingly, this personal freedom which is the promise of all true religion; including our own, when we pierce through to the truth of it.

The free mind is a great gift to win and a great blessing to humanity wherever we find it at work. But the free man is humanity's best hope, the highest goal we can aim to reach, the promise of our faith and the mark of every son of the living God.

## WE BELIEVE IN GOODNESS

**T**HE Unitarian Report called *A Free Religious Faith* which was published twenty-five years ago has a paper on the social implications of religion which contains this thought: "If religion is to vindicate its claims, it must show itself to be a guide, not merely to the attainment of Truth, but to the achievement of the Good". You would hardly think that that needs to be said in any religious tradition, but there it is in black and white, Religion is not only about the attainment of truth but also about the achievement of the good.

But perhaps it does need to be said again and again because I can remember a lady who complained that when she came to church she was always being told to be good, and that did not

seem right to her. And I can recall that sometimes, in discussion with those who want to expand the idea of God, or of worship, or of religion, to embrace everything in life, I find myself obliged to point out that religion is on the side of the good ; it is *for* some things and *against* others, it is consistently *for* good and *against* evil.

### **nature and source**

It is part of Unitarian belief that there is something which can be called goodness in which we believe. If we ask what is the nature and source of this goodness we find that there is more than one Unitarian answer. Thinking of the source of goodness, some of us will say, as Jesus reportedly once said when a man called him good, "there is none good but God". In this view, goodness is a divine thing, an absolute reality ; bound up with, or part of, the nature of the divine reality traditionally called God. It follows from this belief that we work out what goodness means in our own life, our own times, our own community, from our sense of, or idea of God, our notion of divine purposes touching human life.

If we do not have a strong sense of God as part of our belief (and many Unitarians do not) we look elsewhere for the source of goodness and the measure of it. A good many Unitarians used to look, and some continue to look today, to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth as the perfect man, or the best man who ever lived, or as a very good man. Those who take this view have to forget that Jesus denied his own goodness and attributed it to the God in whom he believed. They seem to be able to do this, and base their notions of goodness and their attempts to be good and to do good in their own lives upon the life and teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is then an important ethical statement, the picture of the man who went about doing good has a great appeal, and the martyrdom of Jesus on the cross of wood is the final proof of his goodness and the ultimate challenge to us to be good as he was.

### **applied to our lives**

There is another Unitarian position, I think, which sees in Jesus not only humanity but divinity, and which therefore sees his life as a particular, special, perhaps unique, embodiment of the goodness of God in human experience. Jesus then does not provide a detailed life pattern to follow but an ideal of goodness to which to aspire. By contrast, there is yet another position for some Unitarians in which goodness is not related to a divine being or a divinely human person, or to a saint or teacher of long ago ; but rather to humanity, human experience including our own experience as we live. In this view, man possesses goodness or the potential for goodness. It follows that each of us has this possession or potential. It is not as easy to support this belief with arguments as it is to support the others ; but it is the stopping place for those who, while still having a place for religion in their lives, want religion without Jesus or God.

If we now ask how our belief in goodness is applied to our lives, we find, I think, that Unitarians have two broad answers. Those whose source of goodness is God or the Divine, and some of those who find Jesus to be the embodiment of goodness, have always before them some absolute standard by which to measure goodness in themselves and others and in society. Measuring thus, they will always feel the imperfection of human life. They may sometimes feel themselves to be miserable sinners, or at least inadequate moral creatures ; but their faith is that the goodness they can see as a goal to attain is well worth living for and even worth dying for.

### **conflicts**

On the other hand, those who concentrate upon the common humanity and uncommon goodness of Jesus, or upon the potential for goodness in all humanity and in themselves, have no absolute standard of goodness for which to aim and by which to measure. They never feel that they are falling short of



some firm standard of goodness but they often feel very uncertain as to what goodness is in many particular situations. If they suffer for goodness it is in losing the way, is not being able to decide what is good and what is evil.

If we accept these two broad divisions we are bound to find conflicts about the nature of goodness among Unitarians, and we have seen something of these from time to time in discussion we have had within this congregation. On the one hand, goodness is the working out of something in life situations ; on the other hand it is the search for something again and again in different circumstances. Those who have a vision of goodness ask themselves how to apply it to life, and as the world changes around us the question is not easily, and never finally, answered. Those who, as it were, find a hope of goodness in humanity and in themselves are always asking what it is ; in particular situations, social and personal, there has to be much mind-searching (rather than heart-searching) to know what is good. It is hard to live like this among people who say that they know what is good and that their problem is how to apply that knowledge. On the other hand, it is hard to be patient with the questionings of those who seem unable to decide right from wrong when you yourself have a way of judging which is always ready for use.

### doing and being

But whatever our belief about the source and nature of goodness we seem to share the same ideals and problems in the practical application of the belief in goodness to the business of living. For example, again and again in our literature (and in that of some other religious traditions) there appears the problem of choosing between *being* good and *doing* good. Our 19th century giant of thought, Dr. James Martineau, has a passage in one of his volumes on *Endeavours after the Christian Life* (notice the title) about "having, doing and being". "Some men," he says, "are eminent for what they possess ; some for what they achieve ; others, for what they are. Having, doing

and being constitute the three great distinctions of mankind, and the three great functions of their life. And (he goes on to say) though they are necessarily all blended, more or less, in each individual, it is seldom difficult to say which of them is prominent in the impression left upon us by our fellow-man". He then spells out in some detail the life of those dominated by the idea of having and those dedicated to the idea of doing. "But there is a life higher than either of these" he says, and by higher he means better, more valuable, more worthy. "The saintly is beyond the heroic mind. To get good, is animal ; to do good, is human ; to be good, is divine".

It is a neat statement which nowadays will delight a few, irritate some and perplex many. We live in an acquisitive society and invest some goodness in the business of having things. We say that it is good to have things in moderation, or we may say, evasively, that there is nothing wrong in having things. Martineau says that it is "animal", and by that he means that the desire to have belongs to the less-than-human part of ourselves. Unfair to animals, some of us will think, but we take his meaning. That to do good is human will command more support. It is the middle statement with which most of us can agree. But some will say that it is difficult to do good because it is difficult to see what goodness is. And others will say that doing good is not enough, it is not the best use of our life ; there is a higher course to follow, that of being good. To be good, Martineau says, is divine ; and some will doubt and some will agree.

### individual and society

The Report which I quoted at the beginning discusses in some detail the conflict between doing good and being good. It considers, as alternatives, the application of goodness to the building up of personal holiness and righteousness, and the application of goodness in religion to the making of a better society. I will be surprised if there are not many of us who have met this dilemma in our own lives and some of us who have never really resolved it.

In the history of our own religious movement the dilemma can be seen from generation to generation. Sometimes, and in some places, we have given first place to the achievement of goodness in our personal lives ; in other situations we have put a concern for society first, or given it our exclusive attention. In the history of this congregation we can see it. The generation before ours here was overtly and actively political in the cause of peace and of socialism, that being their understanding of the way in which their religion was guiding them not merely to the attainment of truth but to the achievement of good. Today, we are divided or have a foot in either camp. I can see in my own life the times when religion has meant for me primarily being good, and the times when the call was to do good. I think I live now with as strong a desire as ever to follow the first way, the path of personal holiness towards a goal I have known for many years ; but I am forced to try to follow the road of doing good because of an awareness of desperate human needs the world over and in our own sick society.

## WE BELIEVE IN BEAUTY

### progress

Perhaps we Unitarians are held together as a movement or as a congregation, or as individuals when faced by this dilemma, by a belief in human progress. That pre-supposes something called goodness which is available to humanity and which allows us to believe, despite much contrary evidence, that man's life can be better inwardly and outwardly. From just outside our movement comes this thought which provides us perhaps with common ground for our belief in goodness. It will serve as a conclusion which allows each one of us some room for further thought and action, as the belief in goodness ought always to do. Axel Stern, a teacher of philosophy, wrote this in *The Science of Freedom* (Longmans, 1969): “. . . we must know how to foster, in ourselves and in others, the motives to strive for what is good against what is bad. We must understand how a more moral state of man can be brought about. And then we must do it.”

**T**HIS is the sixth of nine sermons at monthly intervals about Unitarian theology. So far we have had “What is man ?”, “What is God ?”, “Who needs Jesus ?”, “What is religion ?” and “Truth and religion.” Still to come are sermons about goodness, freedom and tolerance. Today we have the affirmation that we (that is to say, we Unitarians) believe in beauty. “Of course”, you may say, “So what ? So does everyone believe in beauty. So that when you say we believe in beauty you have said everything and nothing”. But those reactions, if anyone makes them, are perhaps not entirely accurate and rather too simplified.

If we believe in beauty we have to venture to define what beauty is. We have to reach some idea of the source of it and the quality of it ; and then if the belief in beauty is part of our religion we have to relate that to the business of living. It may be the case that while everyone believes in beauty the important thing for humanity is how much they believe in it, what priority we give to beauty in our lives, personal and social.

### **perspectives open to man**

But to begin somewhere near the beginning ; in the book called *Essays in Unitarian Theology* first published by the Lindsey Press in 1959 there is a contribution from Leonard Mason about images of God in which he has something to say about Unitarian belief in beauty and two ways of expressing it. This is what he says: "If the Fatherhood and Personality of God are felt to be inadequate, (as symbols of God, he means) what of the Unitarian favourites: God as Spirit, Goodness, Truth, Beauty? These are verbal symbols, general abstract concepts which do not readily translate into rich imagery". He then describes what we mean by these words and of beauty he says: "By 'beauty' we mean that there are perspectives open to man by which his imagination and love are released because they encounter fitness, balance, proportion, smoothness, or even a sudden fickle incongruity, which pleases". And by "God" (he continues) "we mean the sum of these factors (spirit, goodness, truth, beauty), their influence upon us, their power to redeem what otherwise might be pointless existence, their challenge to be expressing them in our lives. God is then the supreme symbol for ideas which we dare not lose". A page or so further on in his essay Mason offers an alternative way of expressing these ideas which pivot upon the name of God. He says, "The symbolic statements: God is Spirit, Goodness, Truth, Beauty: can be expressed alternatively as: I respond to spiritual insight, to good deeds, to true discoveries and statements, to beautiful occasions with approval and excitement: I find them the most important factors in my life and determine

to live by them as ideals. When we incorporate these discoveries and decisions into the inner fibre of our personalities we satisfy our hunger for meaning, we learn to live in terms of purpose and attempt to shape our world by them".

### **two modes of statement**

Mason is saying that we may express our belief in beauty in theistic terms which centre it upon God or in humanist terms which leave God out. He adds that there can be a continuing debate about whether these two modes of statement are saying the same thing or not, but reminds us that it will be a debate about linguistics rather than about experience. So let us accept his advice and recognise that among us here there will be more than one way of stating our experience of beauty and our beliefs about that experience. I find I can use either of the descriptions he has given, and other may be able to do likewise ; but some others will be conscious of the differences between theistic and humanist modes of seeing and saying, and will choose one rather than the other. I venture to suggest that if we cannot say something like one or other of his statements it may be that we do not believe in beauty in any sense which can be called religious!

But, supposing that we do, what place does such a belief have in our lives? I am thankful nearly every day, and certainly every time I return from somewhere else, that I live in a beautiful city. Often the eye sees something in the streets and buildings and skylines of our city which, in Mason's words, releases our imagination and love. But not only in what man has made ; in the air and the light and the sounds of wind and trees and birds and water we have beauty around us here. It is in people also ; how they look, how they walk, what they wear, what they say and do. It is in events ; in worship, in sport, in concerts, in plays, in exhibitions. There is beauty in relationships ; between friends, in families, among children and young people, among the elderly.

I am thankful to be surrounded by beauty in the place in which I live. My experience of it teaches me in many ways. I learn something of my own needs and those of others. I am made humble by the achievements of creative people. I see that some care about themselves and the world around them, and work to give beauty to life for others to share. I am made aware that there is something which can be called natural beauty in the order of nature, in plants, animals and people ; and I see that there are impulses in humanity to destroy natural beauty sometimes ; and I see that humanity does not always give beauty a high place in the life of a city or a community.

### **absolute values**

So life cannot be just the contemplation and enjoyment of beauty, any more than religion can be only the belief in beauty. It has to be related to all the rest of life and all the rest of our religion or faith. Another Unitarian book, *A Free Religious Faith*, which has a chapter about truth, beauty and goodness as absolute values (which you may or may not accept, though my friends know that I do accept this belief)—which makes a useful point about relating these values to one another. These three values, truth, goodness and beauty (it says) are ultimately necessary to each other. “To win truth, goodness (at least in the sense of moral loyalty to truth) is necessary. Beauty is not sound unless it is also true, and again goodness is necessary—as loyalty to beauty. Goodness is not sound unless it is instinct with truth and has the grace of beauty. These values,” this writer says, “are united in one living spirit”.

### **problems to face**

But in our day-to-day lives there are many particular situations and problems to face. I can remember how when we discussed some years ago the renovation of this church, there were some who said that we did not need beauty in our surroundings to worship truly, and some who said that it was not good to spend money and effort on beauty when so much more goodness is needed in the world. But others of us wanted

beauty to have its place in the church and the practice of worship. We recognised in ourselves a need for it here ; and the beauty we have around us now, such as it is, was a compromise achievement. Everything was cleaned and painted, new lighting and floor coverings were provided, but the woodwork was left in its original dark colouring and another window which some of us desired was not provided. I still hope for it some day! This is a particular and local example of the problems we face in implementing our belief in beauty in day-to-day living, where there are other needs, and other beliefs in others and in ourselves.

### **other considerations**

With every development in our city of housing and roads, shops and public buildings, considerations of beauty must contend with considerations of cost and profitability, convenience and space, and, not least, the beliefs of those who give beauty a low priority in their values. With our knowledge of the nation and the world continually fed from many sources we have to relate our desire for beauty in the lives of everyone to the facts of poverty and ignorance and injustice and greed which dominate life in some places and threaten it in others. With every pound of tax we pay we have to note that the claims of health and administration, defence and education contend with the claims of the arts which are the chief custodians and creators of beauty in the man-made world. With every development in the field of education we have to consider whether children's natural response to beauty in life is fostered by education or stunted by too much concentration in school upon other things. There is every day somewhere, somehow, enough beauty in life to take our breath away, but it is not available to everyone by any means, and not everyone who finds it can respond equally to it.

### **beauty within**

It is our belief that religion is primarily a personal thing, that it is one's own beliefs which matter in the last resort ; though we need a community of believers in which to formulate

and sustain them. It follows, I think, that our belief in beauty comes back to ourself in the end. When we have done our best to relate it to God and to mankind, and to the world and the city and the church, we still have to relate it to our self. There are questions to ask ourselves about how much beauty we contribute to the common life—in thought and word and deed—the phrase which comes so easily but has some accuracy even so. Everyone, acting towards others, can bring some beauty to the deed or leave it out.

I know that some find it hard to discover any beauty in themselves, and sometimes they are the people to whom the rest of life also seems unlovely ; but it is surely part of our understanding of man that there is truth, goodness and beauty in him, that we have the power within ourselves to discover beauty, to respond to it with imagination and love, and the common shared human need to give it a high place in our lives for our own wellbeing and for the good of all. These are not easy convictions to hold in the modern world, but it is necessary to the good life of man that we do hold them, and in every way we can extend their influence in daily living.

## WHY WE ARE UNITARIANS

**F**IRST and foremost, we are Unitarians because we must follow our own reason and conscience in deciding what to believe, and by what beliefs to live. If we grow up in a Unitarian congregation this may be so natural to us that we remain largely unaware of it unless we turn to some other kind of church and find that there our own reason and conscience are not allowed to have first place in our spiritual life. But the reverse experience is more common among us. We grow up in some other kind of church and gradually reach a point at which we find that we are led away *by reason* from the teachings which the church proclaims to other beliefs which are our own ; and we are then led *by conscience* out of that church because we feel uncomfortable or hypocritical in remaining there.

But this combined operation of reason and conscience which forces us out of the church of our upbringing does not, by itself, bring us into a Unitarian congregation or (if we have grown up in a Unitarian church) does not, by itself, keep us there.

### **a guiding light**

So, secondly, we are Unitarians because we are people for whom the spiritual life is important ; people who need to have a faith to live by ; who need a light to follow. For us it must be an inward faith, an inward light ; and we cannot ignore it. Compare the situation of those who come out of the church of their upbringing and never seek another kind of church, never actively pursue the spiritual life, never actively cultivate their own beliefs for living again. They are people who can live without religion as a guiding light. Of course they will find some rule and light and ambition and hope by which to live—success, happiness, fame, comfort, satisfaction—in the course of their lives they may shift from one beckoning light to another. But we are Unitarians because in some way we believe in, or hope for, or seek after, a single light, an absolute light, a divine light, by which to live. It may be something felt by the heart or reasoned by the mind ; most often it is some difficult-to-explain combination of the two. But whatever it is, it has an important place in our life—at certain times we know that it is the most important thing in life though from day to day we usually manage to forget that. We are Unitarians because our religious faith must be our own, resting on our reason, approved by our conscience ; and we are Unitarians because that faith is important to us—we cannot ignore it or minimise it.

Third, we are Unitarians because, being people like that, with that kind of faith, we need the support and companionship of people living in the same way. There may well be people like us who do not have this need. They cultivate their own faith more or less alone, and do it successfully ; apparently not needing to know that others follow the same road, not needing to share their journey with others.

### **a need to share**

We are the ones who, having chosen, or having been forced by our nature to choose, an individual way in religion, nevertheless need help and companionship to continue in that way. We

have confidence in our way because we know others take the same course. In meeting with others in worship or other ways we are kept up to the mark, as it were, we are encouraged to believe in what we believe and to go on trusting our reason and conscience wherever they lead us. We are Unitarians because we need and choose to associate with others of like mind.

We are Unitarians, in the fourth place, because we believe that this individual way in religion needs, or deserves to be embodied in some kind of institution (traditionally, a church) ; needs to be expressed in some kind of rites and ceremonies (traditionally, the church service) ; needs to be proclaimed to others (traditionally, through the preaching of one whom we appoint to speak for us). It may be that this reason for being a Unitarian is breaking down ; but, taking things as they are up to now, Unitarians are those, who, trusting reason and conscience as their way in religion and giving religion a central place in their lives, and needing the support of one another, come together in the institution called the church, share worship with one another and accept the spiritual leadership of a minister. This may be because so many of us have grown up in churches, as worshippers under ministers. We are, as it were, conditioned to identify religion with that kind of framework.

### **consequential reasons**

But if we are Unitarians because of these four reasons, which have to do with our needs, we are also Unitarians for four consequential reasons which arise out of our shared beliefs, methods and experiences. Fifthly, we are Unitarians because we recognise that there are other ways in religion, as valid for other people as ours is for us. We constitute a separate movement or church because we believe that man's search for, and his expression of, his spiritual life needs and allows for many different ways and many different kinds of institutions. This is a way of saying that we are Unitarians because we accord a high place to tolerance in the pursuit and practice of religion—a higher place than we accord to unity in religion. Our own

way in religion is so bound up with tolerance—our need of it as well as the value we give it—that we could not be in any church or movement where it does not have a very high place. We are Unitarians because we must stand outside all dogmatic and authoritarian religion.

Sixth, we are Unitarians because we must have unlimited freedom to follow our own reason and conscience in the spiritual life. This reason is mixed up with the fifth one but has its own identity as well. In the kind of church we ourselves create it is only a good place for us if freedom is its basis. Our way in religion may let us stand still, but it is as likely, or more likely, to move us on—to give us new light as our knowledge and wisdom grow. We must therefore be a church which gives the utmost freedom to all its people, including its minister, to change and grow in thought and feeling. We need also (though we have not always had) an equal climate of freedom in the world around us. We often become Unitarians because we need a free climate in which to express or explore our own spiritual thoughts and feelings ; but when we find that climate in a Unitarian Church and nowhere else, we have to go on being Unitarians to defend its right to exist, in a world which sees many impulses to limit freedom.

#### **turned to the world**

Seventh, we are Unitarians because, while we have a place in our lives for a church and while we give special care to the cultivation of our beliefs, we cannot, by the nature of our method and our faith “ separate our thoughts from our actions, our beliefs from our occupations ”. Because our light is inward and our own, we are not dependent upon a church or a scripture, or a ceremony or a minister. These things help ; but our religion, starting from within us, is not turned to the church but to the world. It is with us all the time, it goes with us into all our activities ; so that, for us, the quality of everyday living is the ultimate test of the worth of our religion, rather than the beauty of our church, or the number of our services, or the

splendour of our liturgy, or the sacredness of particular sacraments. The logic of our position may take something from our churches and church life when they are compared with all the religion which is church-centred, but the quality of our life in the world ought to more than make up for our insufficiencies as a church.

Eighth and last, when we look at life as a whole we see that life itself and the world at large need those principles which are the essence of our faith. The world needs the care for reasoned truth which is important to us ; the world needs tolerance in every part of its affairs not only in religion ; the world needs freedom for people to grow and change, for that is the nature of our human life. But these principles are constantly under attack, and therefore we are Unitarians because, believing in them for ourselves, we want to defend and extend truth, tolerance and freedom among all men.

#### **in a few words**

Firstly, we are Unitarians because our own reason and conscience are the foundations of our religion ; second, our religion is the foundation of our life ; third, we need the support and companionship of people following the same way ; fourth, we need the embodiment of our kind of religion in church, and worship and ministerial leadership. Fifth, we are Unitarians because we need a climate of tolerance for our faith ; sixth, because we must have unlimited freedom to follow where reason and conscience lead us ; seventh, because we cannot separate our beliefs from our actions, and eighth and finally, we are Unitarians because the world as a whole needs the principles we need for our faith.

The Unitarian way in religion and life is not for everyone ; we do not send out missionaries to convert all men to our way ; but in every generation there are some who need this way ; as knowledge grows there are probably more and more who need this way ; and for those who find it, and follow it faithfully, it may be hard sometimes, but it is never confining, and, ultimately, we know it to be rewarding beyond price.