

What is Unitarianism Today?
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August 28, 2011

In some ways, Unitarians are like other religious people. Like Jews, we value learning, education and study. Like Hindus, we have no creed, no doctrine, and no dogma, to which all are required to agree. Like Buddhists, we do not require people to have a belief in God to be a member of our community. Like Roman Catholics, we trace our history back to the early church. Like Muslims, we believe that Jesus was a great prophet but not God. Like other Protestants, we gather Sunday morning to sing hymns, and to listen to a sermon.

These similarities grow out of our history. As an organized religion, Unitarianism began in Europe during the protestant reformation. We started as a movement of Christians who believed in the humanity of Jesus. We rejected the Trinity, which divided God in three parts, the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. In the 19th century, Unitarians learned about world religions and began to incorporate into their worship the elements of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Unitarians helped organize a great conference of world religions held in Chicago in 1893. For the first time in history, religious leaders from around the world gathered in one place to teach each other about their religion. A hundred years later, in 1993, American Unitarians published a hymnal that includes readings by Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Moslems and Christians, looking for wisdom in all the great world religions.

Still, one characteristic of growing churches is that they have a clearly stated identity. When members of a religious community cannot simply and passionately describe what they believe to visitors, growing a religious community is difficult. No successful religious community can be all things to all people. We can add prayers and candles, but we will never match the liturgy of an Episcopalian service. We can work to create a closer community, but we will never match the closeness of an Amish congregation. We can reach out to help others, but we will never match the work of the Salvation Army. We can experiment with contemporary music and video screens, but we will never match the shows put on by the Assemblies of God. We can experiment with new approaches to fundraising, but we will never match the tithing of the Mormons. Of course, we can strive to improve in all these areas, but these are not our particular strengths.

So what is the special strength of Unitarianism? What unique wisdom do we offer the world?

I think reason is our special strength. We think, understand, and form judgments about religious issues logically. The use of reason to analyze religious questions is our major contribution to the world.

In a letter to a young nephew, the American Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. (Jefferson's Works, Vol. ii., p. 217)

Of course, other religions also use reason. However, at some point other religions ask their members to suspend reason and accept on faith the teaching of their leaders or the writing of scripture. Unitarians do not.

Our use of reason dates from the first debate about the identity of Jesus. In the year, 325 at the Council of Nicaea a priest named Arius argued that Jesus was a human being and not God. He used reason as his method. Arius pointed out that saying Jesus is both God and the son of God is not logical. Arius was not successful in convincing the bishops. Instead, they created a confusing theology that came to be called the trinity.

In the year 1531, Michael Servetus pointed out that the original accounts of Jesus' life do not mention the Trinity. Servetus argued that our reason showed that Jesus was human and not God.

Opposing Servetus, John Calvin believed that those who proclaimed reason as the source of truth were rejecting the notion of Original Sin, and should be burned at the stake. Therefore, Calvin burned Michael Servetus to death in 1553.

Still, Calvin did not stop the growth of Unitarian thinking. In Scotland in 1748, David Hume launched a full assault on scriptural religion, saying that when it comes to miracles it is unreasonable to believe in those violations of natural laws.

John Biddle, the first English advocate of an openly Unitarian theology, became quite outspoken about his radical views, to the point that the English authorities imprisoned Biddle for blasphemy. He served a six-year sentence.

For hundreds of years Unitarians have been committed to using reason in exploring religious questions. The scientific method is our basic tool. We ask: What are the facts? Where is the evidence? How is it tested? Is the conclusion warranted?

Today there are about 3,000 Unitarians in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. In New Zealand, there are about 400. In Australia, there are about 800. In Canada, there are 5,000. In India there are an estimated 30,000. In Romania, there are about 80,000. In the United States, about 200,000 adults and children are Unitarian. These are not a large numbers compared to other Christian denominations or compared to the Hindus, the Muslims and the Buddhists.

Because of our small numbers, most people have never heard of the Unitarian Church. Consequently, when they find out that we are Unitarian, people ask us to explain who we are. Personally, when others ask me to describe Unitarianism in a few words, three possible answers come to my mind.

If the questioner is a **traditional Christian**, I talk about the origin of the word Unitarian. I explain that Unitarian refers to the unity of God as opposed to Trinitarian belief. I say that Unitarians believe Jesus was a human being, while Trinitarians believe that Jesus was God. Christians who have struggled to understand the theology of the Trinity can quickly understand Unitarians are different.

If the questioner seems **disillusioned with all religion**, I talk about our emphasis on tolerance and respect. Unitarians, I explain, believe that people should be encouraged to talk freely about their religious ideas without fear. I tell people about a sign in the kitchen of the seminary I attended. It said, "Unitarians are responsible for their own theology and their own dishes." In other words, we treat people with respect. People who have left organized religion behind because of closed-minded clergy like the way we honor the dignity of every person.

If the questioner thinks that the word Unitarian refers to a **flaky new religion**, I list famous persons who have been Unitarians. For example, I explain that the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee is a Unitarian. I explain to children that the children's writer Beatrix Potter was born and raised an English Unitarian. I also tell them that my friend Phyllis Reynolds Naylor known for author of children's novel trilogy *Shiloh* (a 1992 Newbery Medal winner), *Shiloh Season* and *Saving Shiloh*, all made into movies, is a Unitarian. I mention the American

Presidents who were Unitarians. To make the case that we are a religion that others should take seriously, I will shamelessly name drop.

Each of these answers, the origins of the word Unitarian, the importance of tolerance and respect, and the names of famous Unitarians, are rooted in another, more basic definition. In trying to explain who we are, I often say that the use of reason is the unique quality of Unitarianism. When others invite us to take something on faith, we want to know, is it rational? Is it logical? Is the faith statement consistent with what we know about the world? Is it probable, based on our own experience?

I say that our use of reason as a tool to understand claims of religious faith is what makes Unitarians different from other religious groups. However, **what makes us different is not the same thing as our goal as a religion.**

I tell people that our goal, the primary mission of Unitarianism, is to learn how to love each other and how to love the earth. We gather in church to learn to love each other, to learn to love others in community and to learn to love the earth and all its creatures. What makes us unique as a church is the way we use reason as a tool in helping us learn to love each other.

Now some critics have complained to me that our use of reason means that Unitarians are unable to express emotion, that we are cold, that we are boring intellectuals. In response I say we that we have in our congregations many passionate, emotionally expressive people. We have in our churches passionate musicians, painters and poets. Reason does not eliminate our feelings or our creativity. Logic and emotion can exist together in people. People can express passion and still be rational.

Our use of reason as a tool in learning to love can lead us in radical directions.

It let us to be active in the civil rights movement, integrating our churches, joining in protest marches, and supporting the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It led us to openly welcome gay and lesbian people to our churches. Unlike many other religious groups, we ordain openly gay and lesbian people into our ministries. Unlike many other religious groups, our clergy officiate at ceremonies of union between same sex couples. Our logic and love has led us to this.

Our use of reason and love has led us to support death with dignity. Unitarians support people who do not wish to have extraordinary means used to keep their bodies going, when they are at the end of life. Our common sense and our love have led us to this.

It led us to take seriously the science on global warming, and to look hard at the ways to reduce our need to burn coal and other fossil fuels that are causing climate change. Our science and love has led us to this.

Our use of reason means that we attract scientists to our religion. So Michael Servetus not only questioned the trinity, he also was a medical doctor and was the first person to describe the circulatory system.

Today we attract university faculty to our churches. In the United States many of our largest Unitarian congregations are located near Universities.

We also do well on tests. On average, Unitarians score the highest on IQ tests of any religious group. In the college entrance exam, it is called the SAT. On average, Unitarian teenagers get the highest SAT scores of any religious group. This is because these exams test our ability to use reason. Jews are the second highest scoring religious group after Unitarians.

Obviously, today America desperately needs us. At a campaign event this week, a leading candidate for President of the United States said that evolution is "just a theory" with "gaps" and that in his state they teach "both creationism and evolution." We offer a religious alternative to such foolishness. Another leading candidate has proclaimed that global warming is a hoax.

In contrast, we are the religion that says trust scientific method. This is our major contribution to the world. We are open to new discoveries that teach us new truths. We learn from studying all the great religions of the world and from the discoveries of science.

Reason, however, is only our tool. Like many religions, love is our goal. How do we love each other, given the reality that we often see things differently, as we have different needs and competing desires? How do we love each other when some of us are young and some of us are old, when some of us are extroverts and some of us are introverts, when some of us are gay and some of us are straight? We struggle with these questions. What makes Unitarians unique among religions is that reason is our authority as we work to realize the goal of love.