

# WHAT UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS BELIEVE

by Charles Eddis

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Unitarians and Universalists are people with an ethical, practical religion. Although they hold different views on such matters as God, immortality and the value of religious traditions — including the Christian one — there is much on which they generally agree.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The word “Unitarian” comes from a distinguishing belief its founders held four centuries ago in the unity of God, in contrast to the Christian belief in the Trinity, God in three persons.

The word “Universalist” comes from a belief in universal salvation: the belief that Jesus achieved what he set out to do in dying on the cross, thereby saving the human race from perdition. All souls were ultimately saved, whatever their beliefs or morals. Universalists became popularly known as “the no hell church.” God was a loving god who would never condemn any one to everlasting punishment. Establishing roots in the United States in the 19th century, many early Universalists agreed with Unitarians on the undivided oneness of deity. In the 20th century their church became much broader, many Universalists focussing on the universal insights and values of all religions.

While Unitarianism was known for its denial of one Christian doctrine, the Trinity, it was from the first much broader. It was a comprehensive movement for religious reform, rooted in humanism and the Radical Reformation. Begun in Italy in the 1530s, it spread through Switzerland to Poland and Transylvania and from Poland to England, to the United States and Canada and elsewhere. It placed a premium on unhampered intellectual inquiry, freedom, tolerance and ethical living.

Unitarians have pioneered in civil and religious liberty, in democracy and representative government, in education and social reform, in the abolition of slavery and in universal human rights. American Universalists have supported these causes. They led the way in fostering coeducational institutions. Theirs was the first denomination to ordain a woman to its ministry in the United

States. Unitarians and Universalists today are active in social justice issues, including gay marriage, world peace and international justice. Their U.S. publishing house is a leading publisher of feminist books. Today they have as many women as men in their ministry.

Unitarian and Universalist views have evolved under the impact of science, philosophy and encounters with world religions. While many Unitarians and Universalists come from a Christian background, their numbers today include people raised in most of the major world religions and in other traditions. Some describe themselves as theists. Others call themselves humanists, others pagans. Many feel uncomfortable with labels, whether Christian or other.

## OUR BELIEFS

If you ask Unitarians and Universalists what they believe, you may find them stumped for an answer. If you were to conclude from this and from their diversity and freedom, that they don't know what they think, or that one can believe anything one likes and be a Unitarian or a Universalist, or, as some say, a Unitarian Universalist, you would be mistaken. In spite of appearances, they are remarkably united in their basic values and beliefs.

I have never known a Unitarian or a Universalist who did not accept the findings of science. I have never known a Unitarian or a Universalist who did not affirm the importance of this life, of living well in the here and now as opposed to preparing now for a life to come. Unitarians and Universalists hold that living well now is the only possible preparation for whatever may come after death – if anything. Life is a gift, a mystery to be respected and lived.

I have never known a Unitarian or a Universalist who did not feel a sense of personal responsibility for how he or she lived his or her life and for what happened to society and the world. I have never known a Unitarian or a Universalist who did not insist on the right to make up her or his own mind, rather than being told what to believe.

I have never known a Unitarian or a Universalist who did not believe that Jesus was the son of normal human parents, conceived and born as you and I were. I know no Unitarian or Universalist who regards the world as a puppet stage over which some higher inscrutable power from time to time pulls strings.

I cannot be sure no Unitarian or Universalist will contradict

We hold that all beliefs must be open to examination, questioned and then accepted, modified, or rejected.

me on some of this, but I venture to say that Unitarian and Universalist agreement on these matters is as close to unanimity as you will find in any religious movement.

We Unitarians and Universalists are not distinguished by one or two simple points of belief. The question “What do Unitarians and Universalists believe?” is almost too broad to answer. Ask what we believe, for instance, about God or human destiny and you will get answers to that one question. The answers will vary. It will be clear that our beliefs are still evolving.

## BELIEFS ARE SUBJECT TO REASON

Beliefs are often confused with credulity. Too often, faith is thought of as the acceptance of beliefs which are beyond question, not subject to the tests of reason and experience.

But what of contradictions? In the event of a conflict between beliefs and reason, which should be modified or give way? Are beliefs superior to reason and experience and beyond comprehension, or must they be modified in the light of reason? Must beliefs conquer reason, the facts, our experience, history and personal judgment?

In the sense of beliefs that cannot be questioned, we have no beliefs. We hold that all beliefs must be open to examination, questioned and then accepted, modified, or rejected.

## NO ABSOLUTE TRUTH

We reject truth with a capital “T,” the truth of a holy book that cannot be questioned, or the truth of an authoritarian religious leader. Truth is a function of persons, of people, not of books beyond reason or faiths beyond doubt.

Unitarians and Universalists believe, first of all, in an open search for truth and meaning. Truth cannot be embalmed for posterity. We jealously guard the right to know, to speak and to argue freely, according to conscience, within our own church and in society at large. We are opposed to censorship by church, state, or any other institution. We believe that truth emerges more clearly under conditions of freedom.

We are firmly committed to truth with a small “t,” to the right – indeed the duty – to exercise personal judgment. Freedom of belief is not a licence for religious anarchy or irresponsibility. It is not a franchise for wishful thinking. It is an opportunity for careful, honest thought. Every person should develop her or his own capacity for personal judgment so that he or she may, in the words of the Christian apostle Paul, “Prove all things; hold fast to that

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which is good.” Such thinking is not private: we believe in sharing personal convictions and beliefs with each other in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect.

We value honesty of belief and integrity of convictions in every person. We do not say, “Think as you like but say you believe.” We say, “Think as you must, then say what you really believe.”

Much of our diversity, our variety of beliefs, lies on the surface. We each have our own personal perspectives and experiences. We attach different meanings to words.

This is obvious when we speak of God. There is no “yes” or “no” answer to the question, “Do Unitarians and Universalists believe in God?” There is no universally accepted meaning of the word “God” among us. Its meanings among us include the ground of being or existence, creative force, highest ideals. Some of us say the word has too many meanings and express their beliefs without using it.

Beyond the questions of meaning and usage lies the mystery of our being here, with all the gratitude and wonder it entails. Our thoughts lead us to a depth we know and acknowledge that goes beyond words.

## HUMAN POSSIBILITY

We have a fundamental and underlying faith in human possibilities. We believe our inherent powers are such that under favourable conditions we can judge and know what is good and true.

We human beings can also act. We have the power and the ability to act constructively and creatively. Given the opportunity we can, if we choose to, make this life a good and a fulfilling one – not just for ourselves, but for all people, indeed for the whole of creation here on this earth. We believe we should use our powers to this end. We believe in the good life for all people, with each person to decide for himself or herself what that good life is.

We believe in social responsibility. We believe in human rights; in basic human equality; in universal community, undivided by nation, race, sex, disability, affectional orientation, age, caste, colour or creed. We believe the good life for all people is within our powers, if we will but develop our capacities to know and to love. This is easier said than done, but nonetheless true.

## NATURE AND EVOLUTION

We believe in the world, the universe, our home. It is a source of ecstasy and joy. It is also, one must acknowledge, a source of tornadoes, disease, pain and death. Yet it is dependable, orderly

and, in its way, intelligible and predictable. We believe its evidence. We believe in evolution because that is what the evidence indicates as to the origin of life on this planet. We view life on this planet as an interdependent web of which we should be responsible members.

## THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

The only way we can understand the past is from our own perspective. We cannot draw on the Christian Bible and the other great religions of the past using the interpretations people of old placed upon them. We draw on the past using our present insights. The past can only live in the present as appropriated by the present.

The future is contained within the present, too. It is within our hands. What yet shall be is our responsibility and our concern, here, now.

## SPIRITUALITY OF RELIGION

While Unitarians and Universalists enjoy intellectual stimulation and tend to be book lovers, we also enjoy the arts and music. We do not use free inquiry to make our religion complicated, but to make our perception of it so simple and direct, so free of obstacles and nonessentials it is sometimes hard to put into words. We are emotional people like everyone else. We value the emotional and spiritual side of religion. We recognize depths to our selves the conscious mind can hardly take in. We have our dreams and our loves. While we meet to inquire, we meet more to celebrate and share, to enrich and care for each other.

If you are looking for such a community of people, we invite you to celebrate and journey with us.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rev. Charles Eddis** recently celebrated 50 years in the ministry. He has served congregations in Edmonton and Montreal as well as in the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand.

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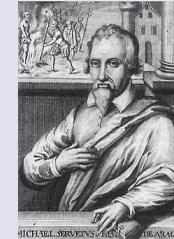
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## UU HISTORY: OUR EUROPEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN ROOTS

### STARTING WITH A SPANISH DOCTOR

The insight giving rise to the word “Unitarian” goes back to Michael Servetus (1511-1553), a Spanish doctor. In his time the Jews and Muslims of Spain were being dispossessed, killed and driven out of the country for denying the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is the doctrine that while God is essentially one, God is at the same time three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jews and Muslims hold that God’s essential oneness entails that human beings, including Jesus, while children of God, are nonetheless beings other than God.



**Michael Servetus,  
Unitarian founder**

Servetus discovered that in the uncorrupted Greek New Testament there was no text to justify the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He published two books arguing for a Christian view of Jesus more compatible with Jewish and Islamic monotheism. His writings helped influence radical Christian thought towards a unitary view of God. Hence the word “Unitarian” – God as unity, or one.

The emphasis on sensible, ethical religion which characterizes Unitarianism goes back to a reform movement of Christians in Italy in the 1530s and 1540s who drew on the humanism and enlightened Catholicism of Erasmus as much as on Protestant thought. Its leaders included Juan de Valdes and Bernadine Ochino. Driven from Italy by persecution, the movement spread its ideas and those of Servetus.

### FROM ITALY TO POLAND TO TRANSYLVANIA

One Italian, Faustus Socinus, settled among the Polish Brethren, a radical reformation movement. It formed many local churches and a large commune at Rakow in Poland. There, an open university with freedom of religious ideas (an unheard of innovation in those days) and a publishing press spread Unitarian ideas, then known as Socinianism, throughout Europe, winning over such in England as Isaac Newton and John Locke. Voltaire, who spent two years in England in the 1720s, introduced Socinian ideas and Unitarians among others to France in his much-discussed book *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, thereby beginning the popular spread of the Enlightenment in France.

Mounting persecution drove the Polish Brethren from their own country in 1659. They went to the Netherlands and to the Unitarians in Transylvania. Unitarianism, begun in Transylvania and Hungary in

the 1560s, took permanent root there, where Unitarian churches have now been for well over four centuries.

### ENGLISH UNITARIANISM

In England, the emergence of organized Unitarianism was slow. For centuries professing Unitarian ideas was a criminal offence. Unitarians were banned from public office until 1828. The majority of the English Presbyterians in time became Unitarians, keeping their property and organizations through their gradual evolution, forming with congregations from other denominations the British Unitarian Association in 1825. (The people we know today as Presbyterians are mostly Scottish in origin.)

### CROSSING TO NORTH AMERICA

Unitarianism and Universalism came to this continent over two centuries ago. John Murray brought his Universalism with him from England, preaching his first sermon in America in 1770. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, leaders of the American Revolution, were Unitarians. All three lived for periods in France on diplomatic missions, moving in Enlightenment circles there.

In New England, Unitarianism took root in the liberal wing of the Congregational church. This wing formed the American Unitarian Association in 1825. The Universalists began forming their own association in 1785. The Unitarians were tied in with the Boston establishment throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century.

### THE CANADIAN CONNECTION

In the 1820s, Unitarians began showing up in Canada from England, Ireland and New England. The Unitarian Church of Montreal was founded in 1842, the Universalist Halifax church in 1843, the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto in 1845. In 1961 the Unitarians and Universalists in North America combined their associations: the American Unitarian Association joined with the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.

By 1961 both Unitarians and Universalists had evolved so that most significant differences between them had disappeared. By then most Universalists were in the United States. That same year the Canadian Unitarian Council was formed to bring together the Unitarians and Universalists in Canada.

In 2001, with the encouragement and support of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Canadians decided to assume responsibility for the support and growth of their own movement in Canada by making the Canadian Unitarian Council their main organization.