

## Unitarianism: Origins, Values, Organisation and Membership

### ORIGINS

#### **The Historical Context**

The roots of the Unitarian movement lie principally in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, people in many countries across Europe began to claim:

- the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves;
- the right to have a direct relationship with God, without the mediation of priest or Church;
- the right to set their own conscience against the claims of religious institutions.

Many came to question orthodox Christian doctrine and to affirm beliefs of their own these included:

- the unity of God, as opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity – hence the name 'Unitarian';
- the humanity as opposed to the deity, of Christ;
- the worth of human beings, as opposed to ideas of original sin, inherited guilt and innate depravity

The earliest organised Unitarian movements were founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Poland and Transylvania. The Dissenting church spread to the United Kingdom so that in 1662, Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity with the intention of curbing Nonconformist worship. On the eventual repeal of this Act, an organised Unitarian movement started to emerge in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first avowedly Unitarian Church in Britain was opened by Theophilus Lindsey in Essex Street, London, in 1774, where the General Assembly is now based. This organisation serves to link Rosslyn Hill Chapel with over 200 other Unitarian congregations in the UK and abroad.



*The Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) is honoured by this station in City Square, Leeds. He is often remembered solely as a scientist and political radical, yet Priestley as also an early champion of Unitarianism.*

Source: *A Faith Worth Thinking About* published by Unitarian Information Department, Essex Hall

## VALUES

### **What do Unitarians Believe?**

This is often a difficult question to answer, as Unitarianism provides no creed, no simple prescriptions about what people should believe and no simple answers. However, in general, Unitarians affirm that:

- people should enjoy individual freedom and private judgement in spiritual matters;
- respect for integrity is preferable to the pressure to conform;
- we are all engaged on a life-quest, the development of the personal value system by which each of us lives;
- our beliefs may change in the light of new understanding and insight the final authority for your faith lies within your own conscience.

On this journey, the individual is aided and inspired by:

- the example and spiritual insights of others;
- writings deemed 'holy' and 'sacred' by the various faiths;
- inherited traditions of critical and philosophical thought;
- the ongoing creative work of artists, musicians and writers;
- the search for knowledge and understanding.

Source: A Faith Worth Thinking About, published by GA, Essex Hall

The Unitarian Universalist Association has made another attempt to list principles to which most Unitarians would subscribe. This is not a creed, but rather broad principles to give a sense of the sort of people who choose Unitarianism as their faith.

### **These principles are:**



1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.



2. We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.



3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.



4. We believe in the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.



5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.



6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.



7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.



8. We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.



9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism - so that people might govern themselves.



10. We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

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