

How We Are Unitarians
Part One of a Three-Sermon Series

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One of my favorite explanations of why we are called Unitarians is that we believe in one God, at most! That leaves room for those who come from Jewish backgrounds, or Islam, or many Christians, while still leaving room for solidarity with atheists, or agnostics, or simply those who don't know and don't care about God. My own spiritual experiences have led me to a personal passionate relationship with the divine, but I also affirm that a passionate and committed agnosticism or atheism can be more sensible than an inadequate second-hand theism. I sometimes worry that the word Unitarian leaves out the Trinitarians and the polytheists, but it is hard to include all possible ideas about God within any one particular name. If you are a person who finds the idea of God in three persons useful, or multiple Gods as in polytheism, or no God, if yours is a path that touches your heart and transforms your way of being, know that you are most welcome to walk together with us here!

Unitarians accept that if there is a God, that no humans are God, and so that if Moses, Jesus, Buddha, or anyone else should seem to participate in the goodness of God, that same participation is open in the same way to all human beings. This belief is ancient, and has had many different names, each with its own distinctive attributes, but for the purposes of this sermon I will call it Unitarianism. We walk together along our individual spiritual paths. Unitarians have a long history in western thought and in this congregation. In ancient words: God is One, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

It appears that the ancient Israelites were polytheists (as reflected in early Jewish laws and biblical stories). However by the sixth century before this CE (so 2,600 years ago) Jews were among the first monotheists. It is also clear from contemporary records that Jesus and his disciples were Jewish monotheists. They probably thought that Jesus in some sense participated in the goodness of God but they would not have defined him as God himself, nor part of some Godly Trinity, since such a belief would have seemed blasphemous to them. The Apostles Peter and Paul who preached in Rome, and at least the first five bishops of Rome (later to be called Popes) were also probably Unitarians in this sense since they were all direct disciples of Peter and/or Christians from a Jewish background. The concept of a Trinity would have seemed equally blasphemous to them.

So the second century Christian theologian Justin Martyr offered this catechism of Christian faith: "We worship the God of the Christians, whom we consider One from the beginning, the creator and maker of all creation, invisible and visible. And the Lord Jesus Christ, the servant of God, who had also been proclaimed beforehand by the prophets as about to be present with the race of men, the herald of salvation and teacher of good instructions." This is a Unitarian declaration of faith.

How did Unitarians come to be a heresy among Christians, even among those who accept us as Christians? When we refuse to settle on just one concept of God, and refuse to grant Jesus a divinity he did not claim, we are indeed heretics, which in its original sense meant only free thinkers. I am a happy heretic! But the real story is more interesting than that. The oneness of God and the humanness of Jesus appear to have been the predominant view for the first 200 years of Christianity. The 3rd Century Apostle's Creed affirms the unity of God and the humanness of Jesus Christ, son of God, born of Mary. However by late 3rd Century, Greek theologians in the Eastern part of the empire argued that a triumphant triune God was easier for newly converted pagans (raised on Pythagoras and Plato) than a suffering savior. So in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire they called Christ God. This ambivalence is reflected in the approved gospels, where Jesus is human in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and is the eternal logos (or word of God) in the gospel of John. When the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity it was the Unitarian Christianity of Rome that he appears to have adopted. And Roman Catholic missionaries were sent out to convert the heathens, converting many of the tribes to a Unitarian Christianity, including the Visigoths, who in the 5th century destroyed and sacked Rome, which by then was Trinitarian.

For as the power of the Eastern Roman Empire grew, with Constantine moving the Roman capital to Byzantium (now Istanbul) in the early 4th century, he needed to appease his eastern bishops who wanted to affirm that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit were of the same nature as God, which subsequently became known as God in three persons or the Trinity. This battle was first fought in Alexandria, where Athanasius was chief deacon to the Bishop and Arius was a prominent priest. Arius argued for the oneness of God and humanity of Jesus (what his foes called Arianism) and Athanasius argued for the triune nature of god (which Arius called Trinitarianism). Two years after Constantine moved the Roman Empire's capital to the east, Athanasius won at the Council of Nicea (in the east) and had Arius exiled. Two years later Arius was redeemed and Constantine exiled Athanasius. These two priests, each of whom eventually became bishops, hated each other and raised gangs and armies to destroy each other. One Roman emperor after another exiled one or the other. This went on for 45 years and under four Roman Emperors who collectively exiled Arius four times and Athanasius five times. It became such a popular dispute that shopkeepers would put up signs that God is Triune, or God is One. In Greek taverns they made up drinking songs: "God is great and Jesus is human," or after Athanasius was exiled: "Jesus was God but now he's not!" I believe these songs were lustier in Greek! The matter was finally settled in 381 at the Council of Constantinople where the Trinity became the formal doctrine of the church and all forms of Arianism were anathematized. This elevation of Christ, setting him apart from the rest of humanity was not however accepted everywhere.

There were always two very different views of human nature expressed in Judaism and hence in Christianity, which are strong in both traditions but somewhat mutually exclusive. One focuses upon human depravity, and since the Council of Nicea in the 4th century it has been associated with the Trinity, Original Sin (thanks to Augustine), and an eternity in hell being the destination for most human beings (thanks to John Calvin). As you might guess, this strand has very little appeal to me. The other focuses upon human goodness, drawing on teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, this view lifts up God's desire to intimately participate in the lives of his beloved children, which includes all of humanity. It begins with the first chapter of Genesis when God

“created humankind in his image... God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’... and it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was good (Genesis 1:27-30).” In this telling of the creation myth, when the first humans ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God said “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever(Genesis 3:22).” So Adam and Eve are given instead the whole world in which to live, and to go on to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, but they remain mortal (and not Gods), and there is no notion of any original sin or eternal punishment for them or their children, only original goodness. Thank goodness that God is a loving Father!

Much of Christian tradition has held that all can be saved and that Jesus (like Buddha) is an exemplar and spiritual guide that can help those who wish to become whole (which is the original meaning of salvation). So that, as expressed in the prophet Isaiah and also the Gospel of Luke (3:6): “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” The modern Catholic theologian Matthew Fox traces this original blessing or creation theology from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, from Jesus to the 2nd and 3rd century church fathers, to St. Benedict, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, and St. Thomas Aquinas. I would add the rise of Unitarian beliefs during the Protestant Reformation which were particularly strong in Transylvania (which is why we have a partner church in Transylvania), Poland (where they were called Socinians), Holland, and England (where we still have fellow Unitarians). Both beliefs were brought to New England by the Puritans and the Baptists (both of which also accepted Augustine and Calvin) so they had a dueling sense of the goodness or depravity of humans, and the blessing or condemnation of God. This duality was also reflected in the founding of this congregation, which chose to avoid theological creeds or theological tests of beliefs but rather covenanted only to walk together in pursuit of truth and mutual understanding.

By the early 19th century, with the rise of Rationalism in American thought, and fundamentalism in the form of the “Great Awakening,” New England congregations felt pulled to take sides either with the Trinitarian notion of the depravity of humans or the Unitarian notion of the blessings that flow from God. You can still see echoes of this theological divide in the names of many New England churches. Those congregations which claimed the goodness of all beings and the teachings of Jesus and St. Paul chose names like All Saints, Unity, Unitarian, St. Paul’s, or Church of the Nazarene. Congregations that wanted to emphasize their Trinitarian orthodoxy chose names like Trinity Church, Trinitarian, Christ Church, St. John’s or Church of the Resurrection. This congregation opted for human and Godly goodness, and so became founding members of the AUA (American Unitarian Association), and our minister Frederick Henry Hedge even served as the head of that institution in the latter part of the 19th century. First Parish has always been deeply Unitarian.

Our own experiences and intuition are at the core of what we affirm. That is why we still sing: “It sounds along the ages, soul answering to soul; it kindles on the pages of every Bible scroll.” And we continue to affirm this same very human experience as variously expressed by the Hebrew Psalmist, ancient prophets, the Buddha, early Greek philosophers, Jesus, Reformation theologians, and the Concord and Brookline Transcendentalists. I recently heard a modern physicist describe this feeling of transcendence as: “An emergent phenomena resulting from the interplay between the unfolding of the universe and a creative responsive being.” This is perhaps

a Unitarianism for the 21st century. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson we continue to look for the unity behind beliefs, and affirm all paths that engender human good with both passion and integrity. The “it” in our hymn gives voice to the ineffable unity behind diverse manifestations of this universal human response to the experiences of life. Emerson wrote, “There is deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is accessible to us... It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whoever will put off what is foreign and proud... When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.”

Why does this ancient history matter today, when so many of our members aren’t even Christian, and may have little interest in these ancient categories and disputes. I believe it matters because it influences how we are Unitarians even today. Emerson showed a way to be good Unitarians with or without being Christian. By the second half of the 20th century, the humanists far outnumbered the Christians in our pews. But in the words of this hymn, we still look as a community for the unity that underlies this passionate “soul answering to soul.” We don’t avoid God-talk here, but rather we covenant to walk together, to seek to help each one of us to find our deepest, most appropriate, most transformative spiritual path (wherever that may lead us). And let the people say “Amen.”

In this congregation we lift up and celebrate the goodness of each person, and in the midst of deserved and undeserved suffering, we provide sympathy and solace upon each individual’s life journey. Like William Ellery Channing, who first accepted the Unitarian term for these New England liberals, we still see infinity in the human mind and in the very palm of our hands. With Channing we celebrate “the soul (whatever that may be for you) in all its higher actions... in the creation of genius, in the soaring of imagination, in its love of beauty and grandeur, in its aspiration of pure and unknown joy” wherever we may find it. Like Emerson, we try to follow our own intuition rather than some religious creed, to bring us into the joy of living. Our own lived experience, our own natural intuition, is our ultimate guide, does this resonate for you? This community, at its best, helps us to become fully human and whole, helping to satisfy “our deepest wants, alike of thinking mind and feeling heart.” This is how we are Unitarians even today. This is how we seek to make the world more fair, to transform ourselves walking within a long Unitarian tradition.

Why does this matter for us today? It helps to shape what we teach our children. It helps to define who we are as a people when we come together here. It helps to decide who will feel most comfortable to join us in this our community. And it gives us a measuring rod by which we know how well we are living up to our own goals and aspirations. This is an extraordinary community, and I love being one of your co-ministers, as we seek together to live up to our covenant with each other. Then we can reach out, to make the circle of this community bigger, so that we become in time even more of that which we aspire to be. This is what this wonderful community means to me.

UU minister Jeanne Nieujaar expresses it with these words: “Religious community is not the only possible community, of course, but, when it is working as it should, it is where we are called to be our best selves. It is where the ideals of human behavior are in our consciousness, where we expect to be loving and giving, and where we are expected to be loving and giving. In

the marketplace, in the political sphere, or on the highway we are seldom called to live out the best that is in us. The prevailing forces of speed, greed, and self-interest [can] take over our lives. The distinct quality of [congregational] life is that we go there not to accomplish something or get something, but simply to be and to become the finest, fullest, noblest selves we can become.” May it be ever so with us all. Amen and Blessed Be.