

# UNITARIANISM

**“tolerance of all but intolerance”**

## Key question

What is the Unitarian faith?

## Key text

### Rom.1:21-23

“<sup>21</sup> For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. <sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

## Key Definition

### Unitarianism

Unitarianism is a formal religious expression of secular humanism.

## Introduction

1. Congregations in this area.
    - a. The Community Church of Chapel Hill Unit. Univ. Number of Members: 300
    - b. Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Number of Members: 605
    - c. All Souls Church, Unitarian Universalist, Inc. Number of Members: 28
    - d. Unit. Univ. Congregation of Hillsborough. Number of Members: 71
  2. The vocabulary of faith.
- A. **Basic tenants of Unitariansim**
1. *The member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote*
    - \* The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
    - \* Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
    - \* Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
    - \* A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
    - \* The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
    - \* The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

- \* Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

2. *The living tradition which they share are drawn from many sources:*

- \* Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves people to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- \* Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge people to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- \* Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- \* Jewish and Christian teachings which call people to respond to God's love by loving one's neighbors as ourselves;
- \* Humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- \* Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

**B. Unitarianism - a historical description.**

1. The word "Unitarian" historically refers to the oneness of God as opposed to the Trinity of God, referred to as "Trinitarianism".
  - a. Traditional Christian doctrine embraced the Trinity but there were heretical groups in the early church that did not.
  - b. Originally, the unitarian position was called "Arianism" for its leader Arius of Alexandria. He and the idea were declared heretic, and was killed out except for a few remote Germanic tribes.
2. Historical development.
  - a. With the invention of the printing press, and the wide reading of the Bible, some people observed that the Trinity was not clearly taught, and Unitarians sprang up again in Europe. Calvin burned the best know Renaissance Unitarian theologian, Servetus, in Geneva.
  - b. Many early Unitarians tended to be scientists or doctors. The Polish king's doctor was Unitarian, and Krakow, Poland, was one of the few place Unitarians were allowed to live without being killed. They gathered there from all over Europe, establishing a university and printing press. Books were smuggled to England, and Unitarianism took root there.
  - c. Unitarianism came to America among the Pilgrims, and separated from Congregationalism in the early 19th century. You can tell which won the vote in each New England town; in some towns the Congregational building is the older, in others the Unitarian.
  - d. Emerson was the first American Unitarian minister who influenced European Unitarianism. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, Henry David Thoreau, Adlai Stevenson and Clara Barton were among American Unitarians, or have been claimed by Unitarianism as being in harmony with Unitarian thought of their time. Albert Schweitzer was probably the best-known European Unitarian.
  - e. In the 1930's Unitarianism almost split between the Theists (those who believe in a personal god), and Humanists (who see human values as paramount). This argument

has vanished today. In each congregation now you will find both, including those who manage to hold both positions simultaneously, as well as other concepts of ultimate reality.

3. Tolerance of everything but intolerance.

- a. Those who entered Unitarianism in the past generation were primarily “come outers” from other more traditional traditions, and were in rebellion against what they regarded as superstitions. Younger people now coming to Unitarianism (often seeking a church school for their children) are more likely to be coming from a secular background and to be seeking spiritual meaning. While humanism remains in first place numerically among Unitarians, those with an “Earth/Nature” centered concept of ultimate reality are now in second place as opposed to the earlier Deists (God made the world but now leaves it alone, the concept of Franklin and Jefferson among others), or Theists.
- b. These all have in common the idea that values are more important than belief, optimism about the nature of human kind, and valuing the use of reason. It has been said that Unitarians can tolerate anything except intolerance.
- c. They were the first denomination to ordain women and gays to ministry, and to perform gay weddings. They are not an historic peace church, but they joined Quakers and Mennonites in opposing the war in Vietnam. Social action is an important part of the life of the church. The first white man killed in the southern civil rights movement was a Unitarian minister.
- d. Unitarians tend to be more alike in their value system across socioeconomic and geographic lines, but differ in beliefs. Other denominations, from Catholic to Baptist, tend to hold the same beliefs across socioeconomic and geographical lines, but have widely differing values.

**C. Beliefs**

1. There is no Unitarian creed - i.e. there is no specified list of things that Unitarians must believe.
2. Unitarians are skeptical about any one person or tradition possessing the whole truth. They are also increasingly aware of the inherent value of diversity for the wellbeing of the natural world.
3. With these points in mind, Unitarians suggest that human differences of opinion and lifestyle should be seen as potentially creative and enriching, rather than necessarily destructive.

**D. Core values**

1. Despite the lack of a creed, Unitarianism does not allow members to believe anything. All Unitarians:
  - \* support freedom of religious thought
  - \* base their religious ideas on rational thought rather than external authority
  - \* form their religious principles from conscience, thinking and life’s experiences
  - \* tolerate a wide range of religious ideas, including humanism
2. Unitarians firmly believe in gender equality, and gender inclusive language is common in the Church.

### 3. Unitarians believe that:

- \* everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves, using: their intellect; their conscience and their own experience of life
- \* the best setting for finding religious truth and meaning is a community that welcomes each individual for themselves, complete with their beliefs, doubts and questions.

## E. **God**

1. Not all Unitarians believe in God or even use the word. Some find the word 'God' meaningless, others believe it is too burdened with wrong ideas to be useful.
2. But many Unitarians continue to believe in God in a real sense, or use the term with a more limited meaning.
3. Unitarians may accept many ideas of God as valid - for example:
  - \* the principle that unites all things
  - \* the ground of existence
  - \* the source of original and ongoing creation
  - \* the ultimate good
  - \* the ideals and aspirations of humanity
  - \* a loving (parental) power with which human beings can have a personal relationship (some see this power as masculine, others as feminine)
  - \* the still small voice within each of us
  - \* a great mystery

## F. **God is one**

1. Unitarianism rejects the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity, or three Persons in one God, made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. They typically believe that God is one being - God the Father, or Mother. Jesus was simply a man, not the incarnate deity. For some, notions of the Holy Spirit offer a closer fit with their understanding of the divine.

## G. **Jesus Christ**

1. Many Unitarians, particularly in North America, do not identify themselves as Christian. Those Unitarians who continue to regard Jesus as central to their faith will typically hold some or all of the following views about him:
  - \* Jesus was a man, not God
  - \* Jesus was not physically resurrected
  - \* Jesus was a Jewish prophet with a mission of reconciliation
  - \* Jesus was filled with divine inspiration
  - \* Jesus is a supreme example of living with integrity and compassion
  - \* Jesus' life is reflective of the divine potential in all of us
2. Unitarians maintain that Jesus didn't think of himself as God - and although he sometimes seems to speak of himself as God in the Bible, they are inclined to say that this is based on a misunderstanding of the text and the culture of his time.
3. Jesus did not survive in a physical sense. He survives in a poetic or metaphorical sense in that his spirit lives on in the churches and believers inspired by him.

4. This view of the effect of Jesus' life is reflected in the Unitarian belief that human beings can really change the world for good.
5. The Crucifixion is not the sacrifice of God's only Son to redeem humanity from sin, but an inspiring example of a man responding to evil with integrity and forgiveness.
6. The story of the resurrection does not feature prominently in Unitarian services owing to skepticism as to its veracity.

#### H. **Creation**

1. The idea of unity extends beyond the nature of God; many Unitarians are inspired by the idea of unity to assert the oneness of humanity, and the oneness of the whole creation.
2. Some Unitarians embrace nature worship (paganism).

#### I. **Dualism**

1. Unity causes Unitarians to avoid some of the dualistic clichés of conventional thought.
2. Unitarians see no necessary conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and science, or even the sacred and the secular, because all of them are rooted in one single reality.

#### J. **Evil**

1. Unitarians don't believe in original sin. Human beings have not fallen from grace and are not dependent on God's intervention to grant them salvation.
2. All human beings contain the potential to do good.
3. The evil in this world is the result of human actions, and so human beings are responsible for putting things right.