Unitarianism

The Sydney Unitarian Church

THINK TRULY       SPEAK BRAVELY       ACT JUSTLY

The 2000 edition of the Chambers Dictionary defines a Unitarian as "a member of a religious group originally comprising Christians who believed God to be a single entity rather than a trinity, [but] now including members holding a broad spectrum of beliefs", for contemporary Unitarianism is a religiously liberal, nondogmatic and creedless faith that draws on the wisdom of all world religions, as well as the insights of science, philosophy and literature.

Today's Unitarian Church is perhaps best described as a post-Christian church for those who believe that Truth, properly understood, transcends national, cultural, racial and even faith boundaries.

The Sydney Unitarian Church
The Sydney Unitarian Church, which was founded in 1850, is a welcoming, non-judgmental spiritual community without dogma, doctrine or creeds - that is, a “free church” based on the principles of reason, freedom, and tolerance.
We choose to meet together in a friendly way on a regular basis in order to:

- show reverence for the Spirit of Life present in all creation,
- work towards a regeneration in our world that will allow the Earth to heal and to sustain life for all, through the implementation of rational policies designed to address and redress global warming by, among other things, curbing population growth and placing sensible limits on growth economics,
- build up one another in faith, hope and love,
- inspire dedication to the highest ethical ideals, and
- develop our own individual theology or spirituality without the dogma and doctrine of traditional mainstream organised religion.

Some Famous Unitarians

Samuel Morse - the inventor of the electric telegraph and the Morse Code
Alexander Graham Bell - the inventor of the telephone
Sir Tim Berners-Lee - the inventor of the World Wide Web
John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft - US Presidents (NOTE: The current US President, Barack Obama, whose mother and maternal grandparents were Unitarian Universalists, was also raised a Unitarian Universalist, having attended the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu, Hawaii)
Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Beatrix Potter, e e cummings, Robert Fulghum and Stephen King - famous writers
Charles Darwin, Sir Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestley - famous scientists
Albert Schweitzer - Noble Peace Prize winning humanitarian, theologian, missionary, organist, medical doctor and writer
Paul Newman, Christopher Reeve and Tim Robbins - famous actors.
What We Believe

Unitarianism has always had a broad and liberal spiritual focus. We impose no particular creed, article or profession of faith upon our members and adherents. Unitarians are therefore free to explore and develop their own distinctive spirituality and are encouraged to do so in a responsible way.

Unitarianism has expanded beyond its Christian roots with many modern day Unitarians embracing Humanism, agnosticism, various forms of theism, non-theistic belief systems such as Buddhism, progressive Christianity and earth-based spirituality.

We affirm the underlying truth of open and tolerant religion, sensibly interpreted, for we believe that the sacred or holy:
• is ordinarily made manifest in the enchantment of everyday life, and
• embraces all persons and things as part of an interdependent cosmic web.

We seek to live together in peace and promote the highest good for all, relying upon the authority of reason, conscience and experience in order to arrive at solutions to problems in a spirit of rational humaneness.

Here is some good advice from the Buddha:

  Believe nothing because a so-called wise man said it.
  Believe nothing because a belief is generally held.
  Believe nothing because it is written in ancient books.
  Believe nothing because it is said to be of divine origin.
  Believe nothing because someone else believes it.
  Believe only what you yourself judge to be true.

What is Our History?

Unitarianism came out of the Protestant Reformation when many people claimed the right to privately read and interpret the Bible for themselves and to set their own conscience as a test of the teachings of religion.

The theological roots of Unitarianism can be found in early Judaism as well as in 16th century Europe (in particular, Hungary, Poland and Romania) when some prominent Biblical scholars:
• affirmed the notion that the Divine was One and Indivisible, and
• challenged the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was uniquely and exclusively God.

Unitarians also have strong philosophical roots in such people as the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Skeptics, all of whom affirmed natural morality, freedom from superstition, and salvation by character.

**Unitarians and Christianity**

Unitarians, who have always believed that every idea is to be tested, every stone turned over, generally acknowledge that there is something of value in most, if not all, of the world’s religions, provided their teachings are interpreted and applied rationally and humeanly. Insofar as Christianity is concerned, Unitarians have traditionally stressed that the books comprising the Bible are written in figurative, metaphorical, allegorical, symbolical and spiritual language, and must be interpreted and applied in that manner in the light of reason and contemporary knowledge. Unitarians do not accept that the Bible, which contains history, folk tales, fables, myths, legends, parables, allegories and symbols, is infallible and inerrant, but they generally admit that it still provides many valuable insights into the world and humankind. Unitarians would nevertheless agree with the view expressed by the famous English Methodist minister Leslie D Weatherhead in his seminal work *The Christian Agnostic* (1965) that “a statement is not true because it is in the Bible.” It is true only when it authenticates itself to the individual.

There was, in the United States of America, a common formulation of Unitarian faith from roughly 1870 until the late 1920s known as “The Unitarian Covenant”, that went like this:

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We believe in:
The Fatherhood of God;
The Brotherhood of Man;
The Leadership of Jesus;
Salvation by Character;
The Progress of Mankind
onward and upward forever.
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Although many Unitarians today would construe the content of that Covenant differently from the way Unitarians generally did in the 1920s there are still a number of important statements in the Covenant that have enduring meaning and significance today.
The Fatherhood/Motherhood of God

The Unitarian Church exists for people of all sorts of opinions from the far left atheistic to the Christocentric. It is sometimes said, jokingly, “Unitarians believe in, at the most, one God.” Certainly, not all Unitarians today agree in the necessity for belief in God, but there would be few, if any, who would disagree with the great American Baptist minister Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick who wrote, “better believe in no God than to believe in a cruel God, a tribal God, a sectarian God.” If the concept of God is to have any meaning and utility at all, it must unite rather than divide. Some Unitarians define God in fairly traditional terms, while others never use the word at all. Unitarians are not anti-God. It is just that the word has come to mean so many different things. Even in this postmodern age, many people still visualize God on a golden throne in some far-off heaven with pearly gates.

Unitarian minister David Usher had described God as “the poetic evocation of all that forever eludes our comprehension.” For many, God is that power—not-ourselves that represents the highest good to which we can aspire. Many Unitarians would identify with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s view that God is the question put to each of us at our birth to which we live our lives as an answer. For many “heretical” christians, God is a supernatural, conscious, and loving entity that helps people and animals on earth. The beautiful old expression, the “fatherhood of God,” reminds us that we are all interdependent. For Unitarians, to call God “personal” is to use a very limiting human expression. However, God works through human personalities and is thus made known in ways that can only be described as “personal.”

The Brotherhood/Sisterhood of Humanity within Nation States

As we all have a common source (“Father”/“Mother”), a Unitarian believes in the supreme worth and dignity of the individual and that all people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty and justice, and equal rights free from discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, colour, nationality, religion, political opinion, social origin, marital status, impairment or sexual preference within their respective Nation States.

Throughout the ages, Unitarians have traditionally affirmed the innate value of all humankind, indeed, the value of all “creation”. Unitarian Universalist Dr William F Schulz has gone further, stating that “Creation itself is holy – the earth and all its creatures, the stars in all their glory ... every one of us is held in Creation's
hand - a part of the interdependent cosmic web - and hence strangers need not be enemies.” In other words, there is but one society within a nation state.

The Leadership of Jesus

For many Unitarians Jesus Christ, although not God, is nevertheless a most important figure in human history, if not the archetypal prototype of what humanity is intended to become - the Way-Shower - who came to awaken us to the inherent possibilities of our own nature and to an awareness of our essential high value that we might have life, and have it more abundantly (see Jn 10:10), leaving us an example, that we should follow in his steps (see 1 Pt 2:21). Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was within us (see Lk 17:21). He died for that particular vision of the Kingdom of God. He taught us that, in order to be happy, there must occur, to quote Dr Norman Vincent Peale, a “shift in emphasis from self to non-self.” Sadly, the world, and most of the Christian Church, has not followed Jesus. Conventional Christianity - an unhappy mixture of Judaism, Mithraism and Greco-Roman mystery religion which was largely the creation of St Paul rather than Jesus - has made a rather sycophantic religion out of Jesus rather than espouse the simple naturalistic religion of Jesus.

For Unitarians, the life of Jesus is much more important than his death. The way that Jesus taught and walked is the secret to abundant life. Jesus' way is the way of service, self-sacrifice, joyfulness and brotherly love. Unitarians, in their diverse ways, have tried to follow the spirit of Jesus, believing that every person has the potential to express goodness, kindness and compassion, as Jesus did, by being more Christlike in their everyday life, laying down our lives for the brethren (see 1 Jn 3:16). For those Unitarians who seek to follow Jesus, he is the Great Example, not the Great Exception.

The vast majority of Unitarians continue to reject the view that Jesus, who reportedly prayed to God, was God. Many Unitarians would identify with what the Presbyterian Samuel Angus wrote in his Jesus in the Lives of Men (1933):

Jesus is not accredited to us today by fulfillment of prophecies; he is accredited by his supernatural miracles and the long train of conquests over the loyalties of men, and chiefly by the immediate, intimate and inevitable appeal made by him to everything that is best and God-like in each of us, and by his ability to “make men fall in love with him”, and “to win the world to his fair sanctities”.
Salvation by Character

Unitarians have a realistic view about human nature. They believe that human beings are neither evil beyond measure nor good beyond credibility and do not accept the view that Jesus died to save us from our sins. The doctrine of vicarious atonement is, for Unitarians, not part of Jesus' original, as opposed to interpolated, teachings and more properly belongs to Mithraism and other pagan mystery religions.

Unitarians have always affirmed that the world is not to be divided into the saved and the unsaved, the chosen and the unchosen. Salvation comes from the same Latin root as the word salve; it refers to a healthy kind of wholeness. Unitarians have always placed great emphasis on the development of character and healthy-mindedness. We are not saved by Jesus’ shed blood on the Cross. It is what that blood represents that saves us - the power of suffering love and self-sacrifice in the form of the givingness of oneself to others. Unitarians don’t talk much about sin, but it should be remembered that the word sin has an “I” in the middle. The essence of sin is selfishness, self-absorption and self-centredness - an attempt to gain some supposed good to which we are not entitled in justice and consciousness at the expense of other people - and many need to be relieved of the bondage of self, especially Buddhists. That is what salvation is all about, and we must “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling” (Pi 2:12). Further, because members of a nation state are all one family, Unitarians have traditionally affirmed that no one is saved until we are all saved. Goodness is that which heals and improves. Evil is that which destroys or causes unnecessary pain.

The Unitarian importance on salvation by character, and not by other means, cannot be overstated. In Christianity and Dogma (1933) Samuel Angus wrote:

The world realizes that character is the supreme possession of man and believes that religion should steady man in his purposes and guide him in the arduous task of character-building; whereas this controversy has given the impression that the Church exists not primarily to promote Christian character but to produce and conserve dogmas.

Insofar as the development of character is concerned, there are three great calls for Unitarians: think truly, act justly, and speak bravely.

For Unitarians, worship, which can take several forms, can greatly assist in the shaping of character. Worship means showing reverence for life, which is the
basis of morality. Prayer is important as well. Unitarians pray in their own way, though many would simply call it meditation. In the words of an old hymn, “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.” It is a matter of concentrating one’s entire intellect, emotions and will on that which is seen to be of ultimate importance and value. In prayer and meditation, particularly in the time of quiet known as “the silence,” we focus on a power—not-ourselves that leads us to righteousness (right thinking and right action), lifting our consciousness to the level of the answer (which, in many cases, is a calm acceptance of that which is). Many Unitarians believe that, as we raise out thoughts in loving obedience to those of Jesus and other inspiring figures, enormous spiritual power and dominion, as well as peace of mind, becomes available to us. Unitarians also believe in the power of forgiveness, affirming, as did Jesus, that our claim to forgiveness is conditional upon our having forgiven others.

In short, most Unitarians would agree with the view expressed by John Baillie, Professor of Theology, University of Edinburgh, who said, “What makes a man a Christian is neither his intellectual acceptance of certain ideas, nor his conformity to a certain rule, but his possession of a certain Spirit, and his participation in a certain Life.”

The Progress of Humankind

Unitarians, who believe in the authority of reason, have always been fairly optimistic about the potential of human beings to improve themselves and our world. Human problems are of our own making and can only be solved by human beings, working collaboratively, and digging deep within themselves for the answers to our problems. We are all, individually and collectively, responsible for our planet and its future, and life should be as satisfying as possible for every individual.

Unitarians believe that there exist in each of us enormous powers which can revitalize our lives and recharge our spirits. Sadly, we tend never to fully realize our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual capabilities and wander from the path that leads to righteousness.

Onward and Upward Forever

Unitarians have always believed that this life, rather than a future life, is our main concern. To quote Dr William F Schulz again, “the paradox of life is to love it all the more even though we ultimately lose it.” Some Unitarians believe in life
after death, many do not. A few Unitarians have embraced reincarnation. Most Unitarians believe that, although we may ultimately vanish from view, the effect of our lives can be felt long after we have died. Life may change forms, but it remains basically indestructible. Although Unitarians tend to reject the view that there is a supernatural dimension to life and that there is a supernatural power to guide us, most Unitarians believe that, despite all the turmoil and strife, “To those who love God [however defined] all things work together for good.”

As Unitarians we come together to worship, to learn, to support and care for one another, to share our concerns for social justice, and to enjoy fellowship together. Our foundation is reason, tolerance and freedom. Our reverence is for the Spirit of Life. Unitarianism brings the Kingdom of God, indeed God Itself, right down into the here and now. In the words of William Channing Gannett, “We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all.”

**The Sydney Unitarian Church**

The Sydney congregation was formed in 1850. The Rev. George H Stanley was appointed minister in 1853. The first church was in Macquarie Street. In the 1870s the congregation moved to a new church in Liverpool Street, but that church was destroyed by fire in 1936. Another church was built in Francis Street, which was opened in 1940. In 1970 that church was demolished and, on the same site, a new multi-storey building was later erected, which is our present location.

The Unitarian Church in NSW (Sydney Unitarian Church) is presently constituted by the Unitarian Church Act 1927 (NSW). It is a member congregation of The Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association (ANZUUA), which was formed in 1974, as well as The British and General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Both of those bodies, along with many other bodies such as the Unitarian Universalist Association, which represents over 1,000 liberal congregations in North America, are full members of the International Council of Unitarians & Universalists.
THE SYDNEY UNITARIAN CHURCH

15 Francis Street, East Sydney NSW 2010
Located within a block of Hyde Park and Oxford Street
Refer to map below for more details

A liberal home for those who want to continue
in the Christian or other belief system

Services are held every Sunday, 10.30–11.30am
(followed by a fellowship time over coffee, tea and light food)
Infoline and Messagebank: (02) 9360-2038

Website: http://www.sydneyunitarianchurch.org

President
Prof Patrick Bernard

Ministers
Peter Crawford
Prof Patrick Bernard
Michael Spicer

Director of Music
Kayne Hayward