

AFFRIM: AN INTRODUCTION TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

When you are talking with a member of the Unitarian Universality Church, you are likely to be exchanging ideas with someone who was raised in another denomination. Participate in any of our many groups you will see the variety of experience and belief that exist within the churches. Members do not necessarily reach the same conclusions in their ethical and spiritual quest, but their search is shared.

Many find it difficult to understand Unitarian Universalism because the Judeo-Christian tradition puts so much emphasis upon a stated system of beliefs. As Unitarian Universalism we feel that each individual has a right to his or her own beliefs, and as a church community and denomination, we come together to share our varied viewpoints.

There are some basic principles that we hold in common, but these are given different expression by each member. These principles are expressed in the words (forming the acronym "AFFIRM"):

Affirmation

Freedom of Belief

Freedom of Conscience

Integrity

Respect from Persons

Meeting Together

AFFIRMATION

The word affirmation unites the other principles. Affirmation is a term large enough to encompass the aspirations of many different Unitarian Universalists. Our spiritual search keeps alive that part of us deep within, traditionally called the soul, and the larger awareness, traditionally called God. This combined blessing of both our inner and outer life is the source of our strength. Many Unitarian Universalists do not use traditional religious language to express their beliefs, but they do give expression in a variety of ways to their life affirmation. Our knowledge of personal mortality deepens or appreciation for the gift of life. We affirm and support each person and realize the full strength of their individual worth and innate dignity.

As Unitarian Universalists we hope to touch that deeper self which acknowledges a commitment to an awareness of ourselves, love of family and friends, and active involvement in the larger society. With all the distractions possible, we have to be strong to hear the music of the spirit that is everywhere around us. With all the secular and commercial commotion, we need perennial strength and mutual support of a gathered religious community in order to see and hear the beauty of the deeper realities which are about us every day.

FREEDOM OF BELIEF

The principle of freedom is basic to our religious tradition. We do not profess a formal creed, but we do encourage each person to develop their own beliefs, their individual creed. There are members in the church who strongly identify with Jesus, others do not. Some feel there is an after-life, others are not sure. Some believe in God, and others are agnostic. We all sit side by side. This freedom is given outward expression in a variety of our services. We are open about our ideas and willing to share them with one another without intimidation. No one has all the answers. No one is trying to ostracize or condemn the other.

Some of our greatest statesmen during the history of the nation – including presidents John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Millard Fillmore, and William Taft – as well as prominent writers – such as Louise May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Nathaniel Hawthorne – have given expression to their free religious convictions as members of Unitarian and Universalist churches. Each of these historical figures was honest to their time and place, and we give expression to our personal belief with similar integrity and conviction.

Unitarian Universalist worship services are not determined only by historical precedent. We have the freedom to use a variety of religious expressions. Some churches have pews and an organ, while others do not. Most services include the traditional elements of song, prayer, and spoken word, but some services are composed largely of music, drama, or readings. Others are informal providing a variety of opportunities for membership participation. Increasingly, a portion of the service is devoted to members sharing their joys and concerns. Sunday services are not isolated experiences, but are times to relate directly to the world in which we live. Unitarian Universalists cherish their freedom of belief and its expression in worship

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Over the centuries there has been a conflict within Christianity between the Unitarian and Trinitarian belief that God is either a single unified force or a trinity in the form of the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost. Not until the Council of Nicea in the fourth century that the gathered bishops decided to institute the trinitarian view as church doctrine. Individuals have struggled against that decision through the centuries. One of the most famous was Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake by Calvin for his heretical writings. A little over four hundred years ago a government was created in Transylvania (now Romania and Hungary) which proclaimed religious freedom for all. For the first time, the Unitarian view was able to exist along with the orthodox trinitarian without persecution. Later Unitarian views were expressed by the Socinians in Poland, and in the nineteenth century Unitarian churches were formed in England. In this country, a split between the Congregationalist liberals and conservatives led to the founding of the American Unitarian Association. The Universalist movement emerged from the liberalizing of the strict Calvinist doctrine of salvation by proclaiming that all souls were saved and loved by God. The Unitarians and Universalists shared a positive life affirming religious view leading to the merger of the denominations in 1961.

The heritage of both Unitarians and Universalists in the issues of religious freedom throughout their histories has led us to a more profound understanding and support for those denied freedom in other dimensions of their lives. As a denomination, we have provided leadership in assisting others to attain their freedom from racial, social and economic injustice. Our forebears were active in abolishing slavery through the abolition movement and the leadership of Theodore Parker, fighting for women's rights exemplified by Susan B. Anthony, and coming to the aid of those in need through the Red Cross founded by Clara Barton. These commitments have continued into this century through the community involvement of individual members, the actions of our churches, and through the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universality Service Committee. We believe in freedom and justice not only for ourselves, but for all people.

INTEGRITY

The principle of integrity in the Unitarian Universalist church expresses our desire to maintain a consistency between values, beliefs and conduct. We want our religious concepts to be consistent with our minds as well as our hearts. Our convictions should not be based on wishes or on thoughtless regimentation. To this end, we have eliminated dogma and have not developed a formal creed as a test of membership. Many creeds, which appear to be religiously inspired, are no more than political solutions to complex religious problems. There are many who go to more orthodox churches who have very definite beliefs, and this we respect; however, there are also many who go out of habit or convenience. They translate orthodox doctrine into their own beliefs. One member, typical of others, indicated she joined a Unitarian Universalist church because she got tired of translating.

Many Unitarian Universalists feel that the term God cannot be made into a belief object in the form of an anthropomorphic presence who intervenes in human affairs. They do feel God can be a poetic and inspirational expression with many interpretations including caring love, goodness, and ideal aspirations. Many feel that Jesus cannot be made into a belief object. He was a great prophet and representative of many ideal human values, but not literally God's son, a second part of the trinity, who died for our sins. Many feel that the Bible is a collection of books of religious history, poetry, inspiration, but not a belief object as the literal words of a deity.

These views represent most members, but others may have different approaches or have other ways of expressing similar beliefs. What makes our church unique is that all persons are welcome and encouraged to speak freely. Members can maintain their integrity.

RESPECT

Freedom and integrity are limited to words, but find significant expression in the daily lives of our members. The emphasis upon personal worth is incorporated into the structure of our denomination and our church through the democratic process. There is not ecclesiastical organization dominating the directions of the church. The church elects their own board of directors, and similar procedures are used at the denominational level.

The emphasis upon the individual is not limited to the organizational process, but is also an important element of our weekly worship and daily programs. Beginning with our youngest children, our religious education classes encourage their early participation. As the children grow older we have programs for their continuing maturing and developing sense of responsibility. Our churches are known for the wide range of intergenerational programs involving all ages, and for adults we have a variety of small group activities.

Discussion groups, music, art, social activities and retreats are an important dimension of our church life. In a social club, we often only know one dimension of a person and then only when all is going well. In the church, we see each individual as a whole, a holy person as they participate in the quiet of the morning worship and the bustle of the coffee hour and social events, in the give and take of discussion or in the casual setting of a weekend retreat. We see our members serious and jovial. We share their happiness and celebrate with them. We see them in difficulty, and give our support. All events are in the larger context of our love, concern, and respect for each person.

MEETING TOGETHER

Many people in the secular culture are apathetic about religion. Spiritual concerns are not important to them. Our members feel the religious quest is significant for themselves and their children. We want to keep the spiritual and ethical heritage alive, but not be restrained by traditional dogmas. We want to continue our religious search, but not be limited by outworn dogmas. Our members meet together in worship and in the affirmation of our common search.

We come together seeking the very best that is within the depths of our being and the expanded awareness of all life.

We celebrate together in freedom of belief joining in the creative search for meaningful expression of our beliefs and values.

We gather together in freedom of conscience giving expression to our commitments to help make a better life for all.

We meet together with the integrity to respond to the concerns of our lives and times unfettered by dogmatic creeds.

We join together in the church respecting all persons providing support in times of need and sharing joy in times of celebrating.

We seek the very best that is within us affirming each day the great gift of life we share with one another.