

## Our Religion as a Source of Warmth and Strength

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**The question of how our religion stacks up as a source of warmth and strength is one that, for decades now, I have pondered and reflected upon more so than I have done - over all other aspects of Unitarian-Universalism. Concentrating on this question in sufficient depth to create this presentation has helped me to brush away a few of the clouds obscuring the answers, but I suspect it's a never-ending project to keep those clouds from rolling back in. Within this group, I have formulated, scrapped, and re-formulated my concepts of life and religion numerous times. This fellowship has given me a focal point from which to branch out to consider many aspects of life that I previously took for granted or didn't even realize existed. Life has become something that I have consciously learned to appreciate, largely through fellowship with you. For me, in an exchange of ideas and values with you, it has been personally gratifying to reach various plateaus of thinking, a few conclusions (however temporary), until another idea or conclusion based on new information and experience was reached.**

In order to put into perspective who, what and where a modern Unitarian is in the religious community, it might be useful to consider a thumbnail sketch of our beginnings.

Many in our church contend that the seeds of our Unitarian philosophy date back to ancient times under various names. Anywhere a liberal outlook has flourished; anytime someone dared to exercise a healthy questioning of so-called truths of the day – there went one of our predecessors. The first church to call itself “Unitarian” was in Hungary in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This group was among the first who dared to disagree with the established churches which espoused the Doctrine of the Trinity (i.e. father, son and holy ghost) Because our church then thought of ‘god’ the father only, we were called Unitarian, (a form of the word Unity). Today, the argument of Trinitarianism versus Unitarianism seems a pointless debate. It is no longer a strong point in our differences with various forms of Christianity. Modern Unitarianism has evolved mainly since the Reformation in Europe. It was among those few doctrines which questioned the various Protestant doctrines.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Unitarian ideas and ideals came to North America with some of the founding fathers of independence in the American settlements called New England. These

**British immigrants brought with them their belief in liberty, tolerance and a continuing search for truth based reason and science. One of the early Boston preachers of our church, William Ellery Channing, preached rational interpretation of the scriptures. He felt it was necessary to interpret biblical proclamation using our own moral judgment; in other words, he believed that a combination of reason and revelation were essential to religion.**

**Humanist values have gradually crept into contemporary Unitarianism. Humanists assert that ‘individuals must find their religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life’. They have stated that god may appropriately be used as a name for some natural process within the universe.**

**Anywhere you or I might be likely to seek out a Unitarian gathering, we would find a setting to examine and develop our own personal religion or philosophy.**

**The basic element of our religion seems to be to take a total view; to look at the wholeness, the wholesomeness, the holiness of life, and to relate the parts to the whole, that is, to relate to all of our senses; to the unity, the universality or oneness of existence which, in yet other words, emphasises**

**the interrelatedness and the orderliness of existence. You might understand this as the modern form of our opposition to Trinitarian thinking. By taking the total view, we are rejecting the three-tier concept of life - as being made up of hell, earth and heaven. But for me, and many of you, this is considering our existence at the lofty, intellectual level, which is certainly not my purpose today. For most of us, our expressions of religious convictions are simply based upon striving for a satisfying way to lead our lives with integrity and meaning.**

**Erich Fromm said that reason flows from the blending of rational thought and feeling. If these two functions are torn apart, thinking deteriorates into schizoid, intellectual activity, and feeling deteriorates into neurotic, life-damaging passions.**

**The average Unitarian today (church-going or not) is usually a concerned, community-minded, socially conscious individual who hopes to help make the world a better place.**

**We are concerned with eliminating injustices and encouraging progress in areas of our lives currently being neglected. Among our ranks have been the pioneers in mental health associations, memorial societies, civil liberties association, educational reform, women's rights, the Elizabeth Fry Society**

and the Unitarian Service Committee to name a few. In our fellowships or churches we tend to talk a lot, laugh a lot, worry a lot – about life here on earth. Few of us are worried about gaining points for entrance into a life hereafter which we mostly agree, may or may not exist. We feel that to live our lives productively, responsibly, morally and ethically is the only way to feel fulfilled. Naturally, there is a diversity in our unity but the common thread in our thinking is the conviction that every human being has the right to fashion his or her own beliefs from his or her own experience.

As the free thinkers we profess to be, we believe in exchanging insights and ideas about our values and convictions. As someone glibly put it, “we don’t convert but converse and thus increase our own understanding”. For this we have no need of a creed or a dogma. We can look to all of history and philosophy; we can look to many of the world religions and cultures for guidance and inspiration.

Where our children are concerned, we try to help them to develop their own philosophy through their own experience and questioning. We try to make them aware of nature in all its wonder so that they can gain a love of creation. As we do for ourselves, we try to bring our children lessons from many cultures to inspire in them the ideal of human brotherhood

and universality. The lives of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, Socrates and Buddha are rich sources of wisdom and experience to pass along to our children for consideration. We hope that they will come to feel that our churches and fellowships are communities in which to share, care, laugh, love and grow. But our approach to everyday concerns through our convictions may not be the same for our children as they become adults. As the world changes, so must religion – both in form and substance if it is to remain relevant to changing times and new understandings. What I personally hope will not change is the reverence for life that Schweitzer raised our consciousness about in proclaiming that quality, not quantity of human life is important, that humans are inherently good and worthy creatures rather than born sinners. True religion, by whatever name, recognizes that in life, religion is practiced every hour of every day; that truly, there is no separation of spiritual and physical, or of sacred and secular.

Coming back now to the original consideration – our religion as a source of warmth and strength.

I understand completely this statement by a Unitarian minister. “The church’s primary task is to lead men and women out of their loneliness and sense of isolation into a

**community where they are loved, understood and made one in the deepest things. If a church can do this, all else follows. If it fails to do it, nothing else matters". I understand this statement because this fellowship of Unitarians has successfully performed this task for me.**

**Warmth and strength - gained from and through other members of my religious community is not a difficult concept or a feeling for me to experience and understand. What I do find difficult to understand is HOW our inner strength derives from our particular way of rationalizing which virtually eliminates from our beliefs, any crutches such as the more traditional churches have, like rationalizing that "It's God's will." and the many other versions of this same thought.**

**I have been able to conclude that my religion is simply a wholesome attitude of mind; usually positive, often liberal. It is an optimistic, kind and benevolent outlook; a happy, satisfying approach to loving and living. This 'revelation' came to me when I discovered the deeply religious ground that all of the "How To..." books and tapes on success and inspired work ethics are built upon. They all put a strong emphasis on faith and belief in yourself and what you are doing.**

In defining for myself what such words as 'god', 'spirit' 'religion' and 'faith' mean, it occurred to me that they are merely synonyms for a healthy, happy, attitude.

What remains unanswered for me: How does one get this healthy, happy attitude if one does not already have it naturally? A partial answer might be that you get it by wanting it and striving for it. Our religious connections can help, Unitarian or otherwise. That little insight leaves only the question of how to inspire the want in yourself or someone else if even that isn't there. For instance: How can we raise ourselves or others from the depths of depression? How does an alcoholic or other addict who has no regard for himself or others, or apparently no desire to acquire any such regard, finally sometimes 'see the light', so to speak? Why do some of us have the want, the "divine spark" which triggers the good attitude, which in turn gives us the strength to face life, while others lose it or never acquire it? I hope you have some insights to share later which can brush some of these clouds aside for me. In the broader view, I feel that the idea of our religion today is to carry old fashioned religious principles into the whole sphere of our lives, to make religion practical, to recognize our life on earth here and now as the time and place to use religious influence and realization, knowing that in so

**doing, we best prepare ourselves for our own future in this life.**

**Developing our spiritual side is merely taking time to reflect, to feel our thoughts, to rationalize our experiences, to revise continually, our thinking as new truths become evident. This process is not impossible to do alone, but for most of us, it is easier and more rewarding to do it together in a fellowship such as ours at least part of the time. If I had not had the opportunity to rub shoulders with, exchange thoughts with, try new experiences with, socialize with and come to love the people in and around this group and what they represent, my personal growth and development would have been at best, limited. People, even those we label as independent or aloof, need people - at the very least for the exchange of goods, services and ideas, and at the most or best, for a sense of worth, appreciation and recognition. Such things may be more readily achieved when we allow ourselves to become enveloped in fellowship, sharing thoughts and deeds, often in an aura of awareness and insight generated by ritual or ceremony - or simply in conversation with other thoughtful souls concerned about similar aspects of life. We inevitably gain warmth and strength through solid connections within our religious community. So be it.**

