

# A Look at Unitarian

## Universalist Goals

### Relort to the Computer

Ask Unitarian Universalists where they want their denomination to be, theologically, in ten years, and the answers will run:

- Closer to liberal Protestantism . 6%
- Closer to the ecumenical movement within Christianity 5%
- Closer to an emerging universal religion 17%
- Closer to a distinctive, humanistic religion 52%

The denomination is currently reassessing its long-range theological and social directions. Next month it will meet in Denver to hear the report of a Committee on Goals that has been deliberating for two years. Incorporated in the report is an empirical, statistical description of the present beliefs, values and attitudes of its 170,000 U.S. and Canadian members.

The figures cited above and throughout this article come from what is perhaps the most extensive denominational research survey ever conducted. A 110-page questionnaire was developed, with the National Opinion Research Center functioning as consultant throughout the study. The present writer served both as chairman of the committee and director of the project.

More than 4,000 responses from members of 80 sampled churches and fellowships (lay-led groups) were returned for tabulation. In precomputer days this kind of research would have been unthinkable; now it is simply expensive and difficult. The sampling techniques used, and the analyses thus far, lend a high measure of confidence to the findings.

### The Portrait, in Depth

Where do Unitarian Universalists fit within the variegated religious life of our culture? It would be easy to use the Glock-Stark pattern in *Religion and Society in Tension* and measure dissidence from some traditional norm. For instance, only 11 per cent retain a belief in personal immortality and 57 per cent do not consider themselves "Christians." The over-all group feels closest, religiously, to Quakers. Ethical Culturists and Reform Jews. To describe their dissent, however, fails to distinguish them from many of their disbelieving neighbors; there is a common religious core.

What would seem to be emerging is a "posttraditional religion." These are people who have left several different traditions in moving to their present one. Only 11 per cent were born Unitar-

ian or Universalist, 8 per cent were Catholic. 5 per cent were Jews. Of the come-outers, almost half reported that they had ceased to find meaning in their former religions by the time they finished high school. More than a simple majority said they had adopted their present liberal religious attitudes and values by college time, or at least before marriage. Liberal Protestantism was the steppingstone for 87 per cent; 28 per cent claimed no organized religion before joining. They are as much "post-secular" as they are "post-Christian," and both terms are clearly too narrow.

Even by census-type characteristics this is an unusual religious group. Eighty-four per cent have attended college. one-fourth have graduate degrees. Two-thirds of the main earners are professional persons; median family income is \$12,000. The vast majority are urban or suburban.

Though only a slight majority are Democrats, almost three-fourths voted for Pres. Johnson in the 1964 election. Membership in activist organizations was used as an index of community involvement; one-tenth belong to the N.A.A.C.P. or the Urban League, one-twentieth to CORE or SNCC, one-ninth to the American Civil Liberties Union. These involvement figures, higher than one would expect from income or edu-

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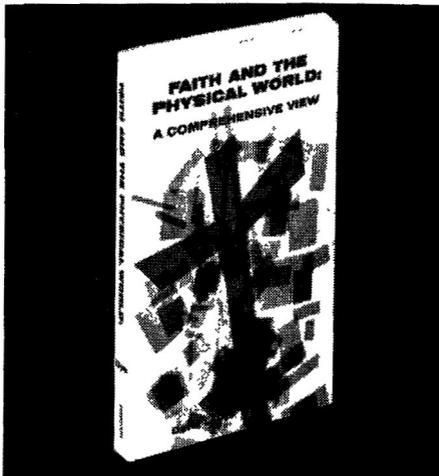
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cation factors, contribute to an understanding of posttraditional religion.

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What we seem to have here is a religion of value-centered naturalism. Many of its ideas are not particularly new, but what were once theological and social fringe positions have come to dominate the whole denomination. However warmly Unitarians today may revere Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson, it is well to recall that in the main those men's 19th century co-religionists viewed them with feelings little short of horror. The idea that religion should be measured by behavior rather than by belief goes back to the Hebrew prophets. It resurfaces in Erasmus and the sectarian Reformers, in deism, in the 19th century's liberal Protestantism.

When such ideas and values lose their supernatural or transcendental grounding a new situation emerges, and when they become the core of the religious sentiment within a group an essentially new religion has emerged. In slogan form, we could say that "The holy is wholly secular, but the whole of the secular is not holy." In terms of contemporary philosophical discussion we can say that while this kind of naturalism may continue to use "God-talk," the God of Western theism has been long dead. Very few Unitarians today use "God" to denote a supernatural being. Fewer than one-fourth choose a Tillichian "ground of being" formulation. About half are able to use "God" as a name for such natural processes as love or creative evolution. The remaining fourth find the term irrelevant. While these usages are far removed from classical theism, they are little closer to a militant antitheism. God is simply no longer the central religious issue.

Early generations of religious liberals made much of the moral leadership of Jesus. This seems less true today. Most of the Unitarians regard the trustworthy historical records as scanty, and one-fourth of them think that Jesus' eschatology limits his value for modern men. An overwhelming majority retain the traditional Arian belief that his "divinity" was created by the church after his death.

One hears fears voiced to the effect that those who abandon God and Jesus will be driven toward scientism or existentialism. Neither alternative, however, seems very relevant to modern Unitarians. While they are convinced that science strengthens rather than weakens their liberal religion, a majority reject the idea that science can help in choosing one value over another. But they have not followed those existentialists who embrace some form of individualistic pessimism in reaction to the

alleged liberal dependence on science as a new savior.

In fact, their greatest unanimity comes in the affirmation of an over-all progress in human history. The criteria most commonly advanced in support of this belief are the growth of science and knowledge, the emergence of a world community, the increase in moral sensitivity, man's increasing rationality, the elimination of poverty and disease.

Two responses indicate the respondents' attitude toward the evil in history. A majority disagreed with the contention that there is "a power" working "through man that transforms evil into good." but they overwhelmingly affirmed that "man's potential for 'love' can overcome his potential for 'evil.'" For many neo-Protestants the return to a more classical theism has been correlated with a heightened historical pessimism. Here, the attenuation of theism seems correlated with a non-scientific historical optimism.

What, Then, of 'Church'?

With many persons today it is crucial to determine where and how values are to be "grounded." This would, however, seem to be a minor issue for Unitarians. Asked how their church membership had affected their "basic system of values," a surprising number (over three-fourths) said that it "supported their previous value system" rather than providing "an essentially new value system." Their problem is less the *SOURCE* of values than how one should choose between them.

This raises one of the most fascinating problems posed by the entire study: What is the function of a church for persons whose orientation is basically naturalistic and this-worldly? If you are not asking the questions that religions have traditionally answered, why bother? Respondents contrasted what their churches are now emphasizing with what they felt the church *should* emphasize. Religious education was rated decidedly most important, both now and in the ideal church. Ministerial leadership came next - and again there was little disparity between the ideal and the actual. And the third was "personal development" - which was felt to be receiving the lowest present emphasis! Public worship was viewed as deserving less emphasis, certainly less than fellowship, social action, adult programs.

More specifically. Unitarians were asked to evaluate a number of possible functions and values of their church services. Intellectual stimulation was consistently first, followed by personal reflection and fellowship. Motivation to serve others and aesthetic satisfaction also came before "celebrating common values" or worship.

The centrality of religious education

deserves fuller explanation. Thirty years ago Unitarians and Universalists began a fundamental overhaul of their church school curriculum. In committing themselves to the developing sensitivities and religious potentials of the child, they leaned heavily on the insights of John Dewey. Many parents, having rejected their own childhood religion and now turning their children over to the Unitarian as a "least objectionable" church, became involved in this educational venture and thus were reinvolved in their own religious development. Dewey, having argued that teaching was the best way of learning, would have been delighted!

Whatever the reasons, the church is seen by Unitarian Universalists as an educational process. In the survey they were asked to rank a variety of curricular emphases, for both child and adult programming. Significantly, they reported that they want the same things for themselves as for their children: more stress on social problems of the modern world and on the implications of science; more stress on personal psychological development and on creative and artistic activities. Unitarian Universalist traditions and non-Western religions come next, leaving the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Bible at the bottom of the list.

#### Sell-Consciously 'Liberal'

The strong concern for facing modern social problems requires further analysis, since it draws together the education and action functions of the church. Facilitating racial integration and solving juvenile delinquency are seen as major study problems; next come poverty and mental illness, followed by sexual morality and drug addiction. On the question of where denominational action should be deployed in coming years, civil rights and civil liberties rank first, closely followed by peace activities and service committee work at home. Service work abroad and legislative activity in Washington and at the United Nations are next. Somewhat surprisingly, "church-state relations" received the lowest percentage of "strong" approval. Nevertheless, it must be noted that all seven of these action stances were supported by at least four-fifths of the members. This is a high action-consensus; it contrasts sharply with the Gallup Poll study released in January 1967, which showed that churchgoers in general differ little from their nonchurchgoing neighbors on social values.

The relationship between Unitarian Universalist membership and common social commitments becomes even more pointed on specific issues. Sixty per cent are more "dovish" than current U.S. policy; almost a majority feel that selective conscientious objection (e.g., to the

Vietnam war) should be legalized; almost two-thirds approve civil disobedience to unjust laws.

The Unitarians' scales of sexual morality similarly move far beyond their neighbors' in the direction of permissiveness. At least 70 per cent would approve any of the currently advanced grounds for legalizing abortion. The majority see premarital, even extramarital, sexual intercourse as justifiable if the persons involved consent. Contraception, predictably, is approved; a majority are even willing to make information and devices available to "any young person."

Members were asked to describe their own positions, theologically and socially, on a "liberal-conservative" spectrum, then to make similar characterizations of their ministers, church board and denomination. Whatever those well worn words meant from person to person, some constancy in usage by each individual may be assumed. This provides an interesting measure of institutional morale and alienation. On theological issues, they feel that they and their ministers are similarly liberal while their church boards and denomination are considerably more conservative. On social issues, they view their ministers as more liberal, see the denomination holding the same stance as

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theirs, regard their local church board as more conservative. In interpreting these comparisons it should be noted that "liberal" is a cherished and highly accepted term. Confronted with such a spectrum, a majority checked the extreme liberal end as characterizing their own theology.

**A "Facilitator" in the Pulpit**

What kind of professional ministry does this group have and want? They were asked to evaluate their present ministers in five roles, which they rank thus: preaching, social action, religious education, dealings with people, counseling. For each role, a majority described their ministers as strong or very strong. When asked about the qualifications of their next minister, "dealings with people" comes first, "social action" is lowest. These role preferences must be seen, however, in a context where fewer than one-tenth view any of the five roles as not important.

What of the minister as a source of help in crises? In the case of a serious personal emotional problem, the minister ranks below the psychotherapist or psychiatrist, the family or friends. In marriage difficulties, however, the counselor (marriage or family) is the most likely source of help, followed by the minister or the psychiatrist-psychotherapist.

By no stretch of imagination could the desire be described as for a "priestly" ministry in which the minister has a privileged access to the mysteries of the faith or a sacred duty to uphold an unbroken tradition. Nor is it a "prophetic" ministry in the ancient sense of ecstatic inspiration. The modern Unitarian Universalist minister is an educated expert amid a congregation of experts. "Catalyst" might be a good term if we overlook the full scientific connotation of an agent unaffected by those changes it produces. Probably the

most apt phrase would be "education and change facilitator."

It is precisely this commitment to change that poses the dilemma of modern religious liberalism. Surely not all change is good or desirable. There must be criteria to distinguish between evolution and regression within a religious movement. In one sense, contemporary Unitarian Universalism has carried the left-wing Reformation to its logical conclusion: the free local congregation depends on the equally free individual member. Critics of this tradition have always argued that it will end in anarchy and religious indifference. The defenders of the democratic tradition in religion will probably have to rely on pragmatic tests for this trust in the process of free inquiry. Assuming that the integrity and vitality of any association or movement depends on a felt consensus, does the maximizing of individual freedom lead toward this?

**Consensus Limited**

Certainly a maximum of intellectual and religious freedom operates within this movement. There are no creeds; heresy, being indefinable, is therefore inconceivable. Some local churches retain covenants from earlier times, but there is little inclination to use these as exclusionary devices. On a denominational basis, resolutions are regularly passed on a variety of social issues. Last year a "Consensus on Racial Justice" was adopted.

It is obvious that there can be no logical dividing line between a consensus on social or structural policies and a consensus on theological issues. Nevertheless, official denominational rhetoric has tended to stress theological pluralism. But if race and politics are debatable and resolvable, why not God or man or progress or reason? One question in the survey throws some light on this issue. Asked how they felt about efforts toward various types of consensus, 90 per cent approved consensus on denominational goals, 85 per cent on social issues, 70 per cent on theological issues. These are of course significant differences, but the extent of over-all approval is surprising.

Might it be that the high degree of already existent agreement uncovered by the survey will relax inhibitions toward more explicit consensus on religious matters? If so, it would afford an interesting commentary on the feedback implications of empirical religious information. It might also make Unitarian Universalists more effective contributors to ecumenical dialogue as they explore their own integrity - an exegesis of *vox populi vox Dei*. ROBERT B. TAPP.  
*Meadville Theological School of Lombard College, Chicago.*