

To the Editor of the Sheridan Press:

In an age of apparent decline in religious values, our community can take comfort in its abundance of churches and churchgoers. There may be room for yet another faith if we expand the traditional concept of religion. Beyond a belief in deity – or even apart from it -- religion might also mean a respect for the inherent worth of humankind and for the natural world to which it belongs. This broader definition still offers values greater than “self”, but encompasses frontiers of thought excluded by most formal religions. Such a church would provide a core philosophy to guide our behavior, but more importantly, foster continual challenging and tempering of that philosophy in light of new evidence – rational or intuitive. It would seek improvement rather than abandonment of cultural values, just as compassion displaced justice at the forefront of early Christian ethics.

The Unitarian-Universalists (referred to as Unitarians) give such a meaning to religion. They stand somewhat alone among churches of Christian descent, in acknowledging their own fallibility. They offer no answers, only a breeding ground for questions. From their emergence in colonial days to the present, their membership has mobilized on countless social, political and environmental issues. Their low-key religious pursuits have helped bond diverse ideologies and serve as a springboard toward responsible citizenship. They regard a philosophically homogeneous society as unrealistic and undesirable. They seek instead a conciliatory society, ethical to be sure, but supple enough to honor the personal nature and varied results of spiritual inquiry.

The Unitarian church is not without troubles. It has demonstrated staying power but appeals to a relative few. Despite such legendary sympathizers as Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Unitarians’ growth and influence have remained modest at best. Individual victories generally go undocumented so one can only wonder at any profit to their souls. Certainly, the absence of both formal doctrine and divine authority can shelter the habitual but irresponsible churchgoer. And as students of all religions, subservient to none, the Unitarians may seem more like spectators than players on the spiritual stage. They might even be accused of nihilism for their vague stand on the nature of God and purpose of man. Perhaps worst of all, their penchant for religious tolerance may grow obsessive, to the exclusion of would-be participants who hold more definite beliefs.

But with these weaknesses come compensating strengths. On matters of cosmic dimension, ambiguity might also be characterized as maturity, which Mark Twain aptly described as the ability of the mind to grasp contradictory ideas without collapsing into a state of confusion. The Unitarians do recognize a spiritual dimension in life without pretending to comprehend it. They aim to answer and harness it for productive ends, here and now. They claim no exclusive insight or historical sanction. Such claims already abound in conflicting forms that can only heighten world tensions. Hence their uncertain posture on those intangible qualities that separate us and their underscoring of experiences we all have in common. In short, they favor reason over ritual, conscience over creed and understanding over dogma. They may believe in worship, but they do not worship belief.

What kind of church would question its own sanctity and invite all ideas to compete for survival on individual merits? A church that allows the mind to explore without threat of moral judgment – a church that can transform intellectual freedom into spiritual resolve and collective action – a church that offers provocative but impartial religious education for young and old.

How can one possibly find serenity in such a church? Some argue that the only plausible alternative to certain knowledge of God is despair. They pity the agnostic, like the beauty queen who, seeing a particularly ugly young woman, privately wonders how the poor wretch keeps from suicide. In all probability one is about as happy as the other, albeit for different reasons. Serenity comes by accepting who you are, not by knowing you are accepted.

Characteristically, this synopsis of the Unitarian faith lacks clarity and completeness. But like many of its members we would rather risk confusion than delusion. We believe that those human values esteemed by all sincere religions alike, needn't have eternal roots to warrant earnest commitment. We believe in the potential of each mind to mold its own concept of what is good. Whether innate or divinely infused, that potential can only bear fruit through a rational exchange with supporters and detractors alike. That we all reach moral conclusions different in substance or degree, matters less than their independent origin and hard-earned place in our conscience. After all, our world may owe its ills more to intransigence than to inept philosophies. Religion will cure those ills only to the extent that freedom to think and duty to act escape the walls of graves and institutions and penetrate the masses.

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