

UNITARIAN

FAQ

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Q

Where did Unitarianism originate?

A

Unitarian ideas have been around for a very long time, but the term 'Unitarian' is often traced back to the Reformation of the 16th century (sometimes known as the 'Protestant Reformation'). This was a time when people began to question the Catholic Church and insist that people had the right to read, and interpret, the bible for themselves. The term 'Unitarian' denoting 'unity' comes from the belief that God is 'one', as opposed to embodying the three elements/beings known as 'the Trinity' (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit/Ghost). This belief in the unity of God is what gave us our name.

Q

Does that mean Unitarians are Christians?

A

Not necessarily, though some Unitarians may describe themselves as Christians, or even 'Christian Unitarians'. Our history (as stated above) *does* originate within Christianity. In the UK, Unitarians are associated with Free Christian Churches, with our central organisation being named 'The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches'. However, over the years we have embraced and encouraged the tradition to 'think for ourselves', encouraging people to interpret, explore, and live their spiritual and religious beliefs in a way that they see moral and fit. This could mean that for some people they find spiritual and moral wisdom in Christianity, whilst others do not.

Q

Does that mean not all Unitarians believe in God?

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Most Unitarians will have some belief in God, though this may be in a more 'abstract' way. Whilst some will believe in God in a Christian sense, others may believe in a 'life force' or 'divine entity'. However, some will see God as more of a way of describing what brings divinity into our lives, such as awe, love, and joy. It's possible for Unitarians to also describe themselves as 'Pagan' or 'Earth-based', potentially seeing 'God' as the force of nature or the Earth itself.

Q

If Unitarians aren't always Christian, do they believe in Jesus?

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Many Unitarians hold Jesus in high regard, though, as non-trinitarians we don't view him as the son of God. The majority of us believe that Jesus was a man whose kind actions and compassionate nature are something to be emulated and recognised. Jesus may hold a more prominent position in the lives of some Unitarians than others, particularly those who identify as 'Christian Unitarians'.

Q

Do you have a Holy book?

A

We don't have a holy book nor insist that one book holds all the answers and wisdom. Whilst many Unitarians will read, and even take inspiration and wisdom from books such as the bible, we also take inspiration from many other places. As we embrace the right to explore spirituality and religion on an individual basis, we don't prescribe any rules or texts to live by.

Q

How do you worship if you have varying beliefs?

A

Unitarian worship can vary greatly. Some congregations will have more 'traditional' services, which resemble traditional church services, with hymns and readings, whilst others will have a more eclectic feel. As our beliefs are so varied, we will often have readings from various sources; this could include bible readings, poetry, philosophical texts, Hindu or Buddhist texts...the possibilities are limitless! In terms of music and singing, we do have hymn books, but the contents of these reflect our diversity, acknowledging the traditional, whilst also representing the varied community we've become.

Q

What/who do you worship?

A

You may be wondering what or who we worship if our beliefs are so varied. Often, we'll have a shared understanding that we're worshipping a positive force; the divinity that we feel and sense on a personal level, but also that we witness in the world around us. Whilst it can be difficult to tailor services to meet everyone's beliefs, services are a chance to consider our individual beliefs, and celebrate these in the company of others, perhaps even expanding our beliefs and knowledge through sharing.

Q

Does your church have a hierarchy?

A

No. In line with our history we believe that everyone has as much right as anyone else. Some congregations do have ministers (about a third in the UK) but we view one another as part of a wider community. In addition to this each congregation also has a 'committee', who were voted in by members. Unitarian congregations are democratic and we make decisions together. The committee have additional responsibilities that non-committee members don't have, such as ensuring church finances are in order, organising and leading meetings, and liaising with the wider Unitarian community.

Q

Do Unitarians
have
Communion?

A

Unitarians don't have the type of Communion you see in Christian churches. We do, however, have something called a 'Flower Communion' (sometimes called a 'Flower Service' or 'Flower Celebration'. This is usually held around Spring to Summer time and began over a century ago in Czechoslovakia with Unitarian Rev. Norbert Capek. Each person brings a flower to be placed in a vase or basket and leaves with a different flower. The flower represents the fellowship and meaningful connection and acceptance between Unitarians. Some congregations also have 'Water Communion', though this is more common in Unitarian Universalism, and less practiced in the UK.

Q

What is 'Water
Communion'?

A

Water Communion isn't too dissimilar to Flower Communion but emerged much later on, around the 1980's. Members will collect a small amount of water either from a place that is special to them, or simply on their travels (e.g from a stream/river). This water will then be added to a larger, single receptacle during the service. This represents not only that we're connected no matter where we go, but that we're journeying together, sharing our memories. Water Communion is often held around September.

Q

What do Unitarians believe about 'sin'?

A

Sin isn't something often spoken about in Unitarian congregations as we believe that a person must act in accordance with their own conscience and morals. There is no guidance or 'rule book' to tell us what sin is, but we do use logic. If someone is deliberately harming another person, or negatively impacting the lives of other beings, we would recognise this as undesirable. Many of us have a deep interest in charitable work and working to make this world a comfortable and fair place for everyone. Essentially, if a person's actions or 'self' is not having a knock-on negative impact, we welcome that person's actions and expression.

Q

What does the 'flaming chalice' represent?

A

The flaming chalice is used by Unitarians across the world and has its origins in the Middle Ages (though it didn't come into use until after World War II). The chalice represents the communion cup offered to congregation members at a time when only clergy were permitted to drink from it. Thus, it represents religious liberty and equality. The flame atop of the chalice has been given different meanings, including being the 'flame of truth', a representation of the 'warmth of love' and also in recognition of the origin story of the chalice, in which the priest who offered the cup to his congregation was burnt at the stake for heresy.

Q

Are you the same as Unitarian Universalists?

A

Not exactly. Whilst some Unitarians will be Universalists, others would not describe themselves as such. The term 'Unitarian Universalist' is more commonly mentioned in the United States. It was actually formed from the merging of two belief systems: Unitarianism and Universalism. Whilst Unitarianism emerged during the Protestant Reformation, 'Universalism' emerged in the 18th century and referred to the belief that salvation was for all, not just a portion of humankind. Universalists rejected the idea that a merciful God would condemn people to an eternity in hell, believing in universal salvation. However, much like Unitarians of the UK, Unitarian Universalists have evolved over time, with many moving away from the Christian-related origins associated with their name. Today, Unitarian Universalists, in common with our own path as Unitarians, embrace an array of view-points, whilst maintaining the shared belief that everyone is worthy.

Q

What do Unitarians think about same-sex relationships and gender identity?

A

Unitarians welcome people of all genders and sexual orientations. As a community we embrace love and diversity and were one of the first churches to offer same-sex marriage.