
Executive Summary



Shaping the Future

A Grass-Roots View
of the Prospects for Unitarianism
and Liberal Religion

Liberal Religion Today

“The pursuit of meaning by the individual in community with others” was adopted as the broad definition of Liberal Religion. The implicit nature of religious experience was seen as essential to this.

Liberal Religion is also creedless, draws on many sources, and involves dialogue with others. It is better seen as process rather than fixed truth, and upholds the right of the individual to personal faith.

Key Liberal Values are openness to change, new insights, free-thinking, tolerance—Liberal Religion is culturally aware and responsive.

Religion can be identified as a framework for spirituality and also a way of experiencing the spiritual. It is expressed best in communities offering support to individuals to explore their spirituality.

The Future highlights thoughts around vision and a way forward.

Unitarianism

In some Unitarian circles, it is now being debated as to whether or not Unitarianism has evolved into a new post-Christian religion, although there is no consensus view on this, and congregations still value their Christian heritage, and this influence is strong.

Unitarianism speaks of itself as an *accepting* religion where beliefs may change according to new insight and where the path towards a personal value system is an individual one best developed within a loving community.

The Context

Institutionalised Liberal Christianity has steadily declined since the 1970s. The question of why Liberal Christianity has not been able to respond effectively to the issues of the latter part of the 20th century is a crucial question for the 21st.

Unitarianism as an approach fits well with many current trends in society generally and religion/spirituality in particular. Thus it is a viable alternative to the increasingly dogmatic expressions of Christianity (Evangelical/Pentecostal) to be found today in Britain.

However, Unitarianism as a set of organisations falls far short of the potential of Unitarianism as an approach. There is therefore little need to change the approach, but a very clear need to improve the way it is mediated in society. This would involve the critical appraisal of Unitarianism at all levels, and its ability to communicate meaningfully with the contemporary world.

The Religious Challenge

The role of *acceptance* might be the key to developing Unitarianism. However, it is possibly a passive, rather than an active idea.

Passive acceptance involves shoulder-shrugging relativism. Essentially it is an indifference to belief. Passive acceptance will take Unitarians no further into the future.

Active acceptance offers resources, support and challenge to enable people to think critically about their beliefs. It is a *demanding* religion: one is always on a journey of discovery, never finding a comfortable port in which to anchor. *But* the truth about the meaning of life can be acknowledged as complex and multi-faceted, and that is a cause for celebration.

Development and Change

*If there is no vision for **the** future, is there the will and guidance to lead the movement into **any** future?*

- There is much common ground to draw upon from Unitarian history and practice, for example rituals, language, and a proud tradition of good works. It is necessary to cherish that background while developing a future that will involve risk and change.
- A strategy of “no change” is one that could see the demise of Unitarianism within a remarkably short time. It must be recognised that change can be painful—but it can also be exhilarating, interesting, exciting, and even fun.
- Once Congregations fall below a certain number of active members the capability of the congregation to perform its functions begins to fail. While development has to be seen mainly as growth in numbers, it also lies in the quality of experience in local and national settings. Congregational development is recognised as essential to Unitarianism. The future offers opportunities for congregations to reinforce the principle of acting locally in a globalised world. This means that every point of initial contact with the movement must be an opportunity to introduce the individual to the full range of belief and practice.
- In addition to congregational growth, the future of the Unitarian movement lies in the development of those of its parts that are national or international. This will require an examination of how Unitarians locally, nationally, and internationally, can come together as a religious community.

Potential Members

Dissenters

those of a religious frame of mind who are dissatisfied with the restrictions of their current denomination

Seekers

those who are spiritually inclined, but do not wish to be bound by identification with a “label”

Promotion

- Each congregation should identify its own growth leaders (minister, lay leader, “change champions”) who should also engage with the Unitarian and wider liberal religious network.
- Creative opportunities for worship outside Sunday should be explored. There have been vast changes to Unitarian worship over the past 50 years, and these should be utilised to the full.
- An additional publication should be considered to explore the diversity of liberal religious ideas specifically aimed at non-Unitarians.
- A national database of celebrants who will conduct *non-religious* namings, weddings, and funerals should be established, alongside those who will conduct *religious* ceremonies for those belonging to the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual communities.
- The World Wide Web is a unique opportunity for presenting a portal for all Unitarian activities. It also offers the prospect of a virtual Unitarian community. It should, however, be balanced by quality books and pamphlets.

Recommendations

Social Action

There is a need for nationally organised action, considering not only charitable but also (non-partisan) political issues.

Leadership

Full-time leadership works because most communities are local—a constant human presence gives life to the building, which is still the most visible manifestation of the Unitarian presence. However, full-time leadership is not available to all, and alternatives therefore need to be considered.

Networking

There need to be more opportunities for sharing and activities in congregations. There also need to be more opportunities for non-Unitarians to engage with congregations on a social basis.

Each congregation should investigate its connections with other local Unitarian congregations, the wider Unitarian movement, and the wider liberal religious network, and build a relationship map.

Whichever Church you walk into you are connected to a wider spiritual network that can support your individual spiritual development.

Nationally

The GA website should be restructured to focus on people rather than the organisation. There should be greater engagement with current events and controversial issues.

National Societies, e.g. Music Society, Meditational Fellowship) need to be promoted, and such promotion needs to be resourced.

There should be a national survey of recent members to identify why they joined and stay.

Communications

The Unitarian view/approach must be made available to people as widely as possible, including an internet presence, books, pamphlets, a nationally approved spokesperson, press relations at all levels.

The Unitarian view/approach should be presented to people in a way that appears relevant, particularly through engagement in current debates (e.g. gay ordination, Creationism, the environment, etc.)

Brand Name

The Unitarian “Brand Name” should be aggressively marketed by whatever means possible. Unitarians must establish what Unitarianism means to themselves and the public—and then live up to it.

Electronic copies of the full report are available from kay.millard@btinternet.com, or can be downloaded from www.TheHibbertTrust.org.uk

The Summary of a Report of the Collaborative Inquiry into the Future of Unitarianism and Liberal Religion sponsored by
The Hibbert Trust

Published by The Hibbert Trust at
1 The Maltings, 63 Westbury Leigh, Westbury, Wiltshire, BA13 3SF UK

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2010

