

UNITARIANISM (PART 2 OF 2)

Rating: 5.0

Description: Separation from God, emptiness of worship, lack of reliance on prophetic teachings and resulting lack of religious identity among Unitarians is the focus of this article.

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By: Imam Mufti (© 2015 IslamReligion.com)

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Absence of God & Emptiness of Unitarian Worship

Controversies about belief in general, even in God, has created confusion among Unitarians. Philip Hewett, long-time Unitarian minister from Vancouver, British Columbia says, "The real reason why it is so difficult to define Unitarianism in a few words is that its distinguishing characteristics are not to be found in the realm of beliefs and doctrines at all...Within traditional Christianity, this authority is found in the Bible, or in the Church, or in the recorded sayings of the founding fathers. Unitarians find it in the reason and conscience of the individual."^[1] Thus, there can not be theological unity when the main guide for finding truth is individual experience.



In 1967 many Unitarians and Universalists agreed that the term "God" did not represent a supernatural being. 28 percent of the denomination in America considered the concept of God "irrelevant," with an additional 2 percent calling it "harmful." In a UUA publication, "Unitarian Universalist Views of God," Robert Storer said that, "for more than a century this personified God has been declared inadequate by the... churches."

Consequently, Unitarians also struggle for religious identity. How can it be a faith and a universal one? A faith has to have some boundaries, some notion of right and wrong, and some teaching on transcendental truths. Unitarianism struggles in these areas. Islam, conversely, solves the dilemma of being a universal faith that speaks of truth and reality. Muslims believe that Islam - worship and submission to God - was taught by all the prophets including Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, peace be on them all. Their true followers were all Muslims. Understood in this manner, Islam is truly a universal faith whose essence has remained unchanged with time.

Separated from a meaningful notion of God, Unitarian worship is usually devoid of emotion. Ralph Waldo Emerson, famous American poet, accused it of being "corpse-

cold."^[2]

A lack of tradition and rituals, no hint of a better life, or progress to a heavenly ideal, not even a God to worship, keeps membership rather limited. The faith is not thriving. The two largest congregations in the world are the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). Officially, there are 160,000 members in UUA and half a million in ICUU the world over.

Modern Unitarians have difficulty passing on their faith to their children. The Unitarian dilemma is that how can an institution provide children with a religious identity if that identity must be freely chosen?

Unitarians emphasize reason over revelation and the material world and action taken in it is the source of all meaning. Engagement in this world is the primary focus rather than the next life. Islam, on the other hand, balances this world with the next. While social work and service to humanity is emphasized in Islam, it is tied with reward in the life to come.

Religious tolerance is a central tenet of Unitarians. Thus, they treat all faiths as valid. An enticing idea, but nevertheless with serious problems. How can religions with contradictory claims be all true? As an example, Christians claims Jesus to be the son of God who died and was raised from the dead; Islam is absolutely clear in it's stance that God has no son and Jesus was a prophet. Both cannot be true at the same time because they are contradictory. That is not to say that Muslims and Christians cannot or should not have a tolerant, civil dialogue about their religious understanding.

Fundamental Issue

Unitarianism suffers from a fundamental flaw, and an understandable one: lack of belief in prophets. Precious little is reliably known about Jesus from Christian and non-Christian sources. Even the Bible is not an agreed upon document among the Christians; the Catholic Bible being bigger than the Protestant one. Naturally, every sect and denomination interpreted 'scripture' based on their understanding. Unitarianism is the natural result of giving up on revelation and substituting it with reason while maintaining a rather empty belief in God, if at all.

Muslims have completely preserved the teachings of Prophet Muhammad because they have good reasons to believe they possess the truth. Muslims rely on the supremacy of revelation without suspending rationality. Revelation from God, according to Muslims, shows right from wrong, truth from error, and guidance from misguidance. To Muslims, sending revealed guidance was the promise of God to humanity at the time of the 'fall' of Adam. The essence of Islamic understanding is that God communicates to humanity and the final message (i.e. the Qur'an) has been preserved. It has guided Unitarians in the past and can do it again today.

[1]

Phillip Hewett, *Unitarians in Canada* (Don Mills, on: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1978), p. 2.

[2]

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, ed. Bliss Perry (Boston, ma: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1926) p. 218. This reference is from May 1, 1846.

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