



Jefferson



Taylor



Arthur T.



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Parker

Small Church, Big People

BY JAMES POLING

The amazing Unitarians have given much to U.S. life. But in religion, are they mavericks, or have they found the faith of tomorrow?

■ ONE SUNDAY MORNING shortly before his death in 1957, A. Powell Davies, the celebrated pastor of All Souls Church, Unitarian, Washington, D. C., was asked by a troubled schoolgirl, "Will you please preach about some of the things Unitarians have done? No one seems to know anything about us at school. They think we're sort of queer. Can't you build us up a little?"

The minister amiably complied. Testifying to a religion's achievements is sometimes more important than modesty, he told his congregation. Then he recalled the statement of the historian, Charles Board, that it was not Cotton Mather's God who inspired the authors of the Declaration of Independence but the God of "the Unitarians or Deists." And Dr. Davies also told how Lincoln had borrowed the immortal phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" from a sermon delivered by his friend, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. There could be little doubt, he said, that the Unitarians had influenced American life and history out of all proportion to their small number.

Dr. Davies went on to point out that while Uni-

tarians represented only one-tenth of one per cent of the country's population, they represented one-third of the names in the American Hall of Fame. In proportion to church membership, more Unitarians are listed in *Who's Who* than any other religious group. Five U.S. Presidents—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, William Howard Taft—had been Unitarians. And although the Unitarians would be entitled to only one-tenth of one Senator if representation in the Senate was based on religious affiliation, they could currently boast of five Senators: Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania; Paul Douglas, Illinois; Roman Hruska, Nebraska; Leverett Saltonstall, Massachusetts; and Harrison Williams, New Jersey.

He named a few of the great Unitarians of the past: Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Benjamin Franklin, Bret Harte, John Marshall, Peter Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, H. D. Thoreau, Samuel Morse, Daniel Webster, Horace Mann, Susan B. Anthony, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Steinmetz and Thomas Wolfe. Coming down to the present day he mentioned, among others, Adlai Stevenson, Chester Bowles, Sinclair Weeks, John P. Marquand, Ashley Montagu, Frank Lloyd Wright and Percival Brundage.

Later, during the social "coffee hour" that always



Saltonstall



Douglas



Williams



Wright



Marquand

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follows All Souls' simple, non-liturgical Unitarian service, Dr. Davies smilingly told the young schoolgirl he'd forgotten to mention a survey of the records of the Federal prison at Atlanta showing no Unitarian had ever enjoyed its hospitality.

"I hope all this makes you feel a little happier about your 'queer' religion," he concluded.

The "queerness" that draws so many great minds to Unitarianism is not easily defined, for the church has no creed. On the contrary, nothing is more basic to Unitarians than the belief that in religion, as in everything else, each individual should be free to seek the truth for himself, completely unhampered by creeds. Unitarians are therefore free to believe about God and Christianity whatever persuades them, in the conviction that since the Mystery exceeds understanding, it is up to each one of us to define it for himself, while allowing the language of the heart to call it God.

IN GENERAL, Unitarians are highly rational religious liberals who believe in the ethical principles of Jesus while refusing to "make a God" of the great Galilean. Because they are rationalists who accept the results of the scientific and comparative study of all religions, they reject the concept of Immaculate Conception, as well as the Trinitarian concept of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the Trinitarian scheme of salvation, with its doctrine of inherited guilt, eternal punishment, and vicarious atonement.

In addition, they think of the Bible not as the revealed Word, but as the single most important volume in the long story of man's religious

development. Some Unitarians believe in immortality, others don't. But all agree that the best preparation for whatever the future may be is to live a Christian life here and now.

The Unitarians describe themselves as followers of the real, human Jesus of the Gospels, rather than of the Christ whom they feel the orthodox Christian world has cloaked in dogmas, metaphysics and semi-pagan rituals. They regard their concept of the "Church Universal" as the ultimate expression of Christianity, because it is founded on the principles of liberty, tolerance and brotherhood, and is open to all men of every race, color and creed who seek God and worship him through service to their fellow man. It is a church from which no man can be excommunicated, they say, "but by the death of goodness in his own breast."

Each individual church within the "Church Universal" is governed by its own congregation and, consequently, is free to choose its own form of service. In one church the service will be elaborate, with prayers, litanies, even choral responses. In another it will be simple—a prayer, a hymn or two, a reading.

But the services will have elements in common. All references to Trinitarian doctrine are removed from whatever devotional material is used. There is never any thought that the prayers employed will in any way influence God; they are regarded only as a form of meditation elevating to the heart and mind.

All Unitarians believe they most honor God by serving their fellow

man unselfishly. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley, present head of the American Unitarian Association, says, "Primarily, we seek a better way of life for ourselves and those who follow us. All other quests are subordinate to the quest for the more abundant life of mankind."

Because they are so dedicated to their quest, the Unitarians refuse to send out missionaries. To their minds, there is no necessity for the entire world to become Christian. They believe there are high values in all the great religions.

INSTEAD OF missionaries, through the Unitarian Service Committee the church sends, to any area where they can be helpful, groups made up of specialists in such fields as medicine, education, social welfare, engineering and public health. For example, Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin, who was not a Unitarian, led such a medical group to India. And Paul Dudley White, President Eisenhower's heart specialist, who is a Unitarian, has organized medical missions for Czechoslovakia and Peru.

In the past 20 years, Unitarian service units have operated in 35 countries, ranging from Finland to Cambodia to Nigeria. In many instances, they have gone out at the behest of the U.S. Department of State, which has a high regard for the manner in which the Unitarians' overseas operations win friends for democracy.

Today, as scientific findings and the spread of higher education make it increasingly difficult for some people to accept what they have come to feel is the authoritarianism and lingering supernaturalism

of the more orthodox sects, the Unitarians are growing, despite their avoidance of proselytizing. In the past decade, Unitarian membership has grown 56 per cent—from 71,000 to 112,846—while membership in the church schools has grown 154 per cent; probably the fastest rate of increase of any denomination in America.

While this explosive growth is a source of satisfaction, it is also a cause for concern. In the past ten years, the denomination has added only 58 ministers to serve 40,000 more members, and this past summer 33 churches were looking for pastors. There is a similar shortage of buildings. And the American Unitarian Association can no longer meet an increased demand for field services.

As a result, the Association has been forced to embark on its first major fund-raising campaign in 35 years. To meet the emergency, the Unitarian Development Fund is seeking \$3,200,000. Part of the money will be devoted to an extension of the services the Association renders its 396 member churches; \$1,500,000 will go into a Building Loan Fund; and \$850,000 will be given to Meadville Theological School, Chicago, and the Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, Calif., two of the mere three schools that train Unitarian ministers. (The third is Harvard Divinity School. Beginning in 1805, nine successive presidents of Harvard University were Unitarians.)

The Association will also set aside \$400,000 to help the church's "fellowships." These are lay-led units—now numbering 284—of ten or more members in communities where

there are no Unitarian churches. Fellowships are frequently made up of "come-outers"—those who have come out of orthodox religions. A 1958 survey of a typical fellowship in New Jersey showed that only one of its 75 members was a birthright Unitarian. Of the rest, 13 per cent were former Catholics, 20 per cent were Jews, and the remainder had come from orthodox Protestant churches.

The Church of the Larger Fellowship is a unique church-by-mail conducted for geographically isolated Unitarians. From national headquarters at 25 Beacon St., Boston, the Reverend Paul Harris Jr., minister of this church, sends out a monthly sermon, Sunday school lesson, and newsletter to a ship captain in the Arctic, members of the U.S. diplomatic corps and armed services stationed overseas, a woman broadcasting for the Voice of America in Europe, a doctor doing research work in Japan, and some 2,000 other Unitarians in 40 countries.

PERHAPS MORE than in any other denomination, Unitarian ministers are likely to speak out bluntly on controversial issues, firmly backed by their flock. In Lincoln's day, the Unitarian church was a militant leader of the anti-slavery movement. Today its churches—including the Southern ones—open their doors to Negroes and actively support integration.

When Senator McCarthy was at his most influential, the Unitarian-controlled Beacon Press was the first publishing house to issue books attacking his practices as demagogic. Unitarians are active out of all pro-

portion to their numbers in United Nations associations and in the World Federal Government movement. They do not hesitate to question what they deem to be religious folly—even if it means challenging the world's most popular evangelist, as A. Powell Davies did when he publicly asked Billy Graham to justify his assertion that "Heaven is a 1,600-mile cube containing trees that produce a different kind of fruit each month." Nor do they hesitate to oppose any movement, theological or political, which they feel threatens the freedom of the individual.

Their lack of fear of controversy may stem from the fact that their church was born of disputation. The name "Unitarian" was coined in the 16th century for certain Protestant dissenters from the doctrine of the Trinity. (Actually, Trinitarian doctrine became church orthodoxy only by a divided vote of the General Council of Constantinople some 375 years after the death of Christ.) Michael Servetus, who in 1533 was burned at the stake in John Calvin's Geneva for his "Unitarian heresy," is generally considered the founder of modern Unitarianism. His followers profited from the first great edict of religious freedom, issued in 1568 by King John Sigismund of Transylvania (Hungary). By 1600, there were 425 Unitarian churches in Transylvania.

In England during the 17th century, men like the poet John Milton, the philosopher John Locke, and the physicist Isaac Newton fostered the church's growth. As the 18th century drew to a close, Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian minister and the discoverer of oxygen,

was forced to flee to the United States to escape the attack of mobs protesting his liberalism. Encouraged by Benjamin Franklin, he established the first Unitarian church in this country at Northumberland, Pa., in 1794. Soon after, Boston's famed King's Chapel left the Anglican fold. And, in 1802, the church founded by the Pilgrim Fathers, the First Parish in Plymouth, became Unitarian.

ALTHOUGH the denomination has grown steadily, it is not a member of the National Council of Churches of Christ. When the National Council was formed by American Protestant churches at the turn of the century, the three Unitarian delegates to the organization meeting in New York were denied admission as heretics who would not recognize "Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour." The three "heretics" turned away were Massachusetts Governor John D. Long, Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, and Dr. Edward Everett Hale, author of *The Man Without a Country* and then chaplain of the U.S. Senate.

The Unitarians accept their maverick role with wry good humor. Heresy, they say, is a relative charge, since, after all, the Catholics regard all Protestants as heretics. As far as

they are concerned, there is no such thing as a heretic; just man, entitled always to his own belief, imperfect but not inherently bad, capable of rising by slow degrees to ever higher planes. To aspire to contribute to the ennoblement of his life is a goal, they feel, which no name-calling can demean.

In the not-too-distant future they hope to be in a better position to achieve their goal. Currently, the Unitarian Church and the even smaller Universalist Church of America (334 churches and 68,949 members) have voted a merger that in all probability will take place in 1961 on ratification by local churches. There are many parallels in the theologies of the two churches, particularly in the emphasis they both place on tolerance and freedom of religious belief.

"There will be a little bit more of everything if we have a united liberal church," says Unitarian head Dr. Greeley. "And it should make our mutual goal of 'getting heaven into men instead of men into heaven' somewhat easier to attain. Thomas Jefferson once wrote that he hoped every man living in his day would die a Unitarian. We're not quite that ambitious, but we do think we have the religion of the future." ■■

