

A Life-Centered Movement

Theologically, Unitarianism in Transylvania is theistic. "It is a Protestant, non-dogmatic, Christian denomination, and a liberal and progressive religious community.

Transylvanian Unitarians do not believe in the Trinity of God; God is one, both in essence and in person. But above all, God is Love. We think that the purpose of our life is this: with Love of God and neighbors, with free will and unselfish duty we must create happiness for all creatures on Earth" (Rezi, 2001).

"We are theist and we consider ourselves Christian because we consider Jesus as our teacher, master, and prophet. We would like to live as he taught us. Once Jesus was asked what is the main teaching of religion? He replied, 'Love God, and love your neighbor'" (Székely,2003).

Transylvanian Unitarians believe that Jesus was human, and a prophet of God. The idea that Jesus died on the cross as a divine sacrifice finds no place in Transylvanian Unitarian belief; Jesus was a leader and a wise teacher, not a savior. Hungarian Unitarians believe that Jesus's teachings about love, compassion and justice are more important than all ideas and dogmas about his life (Rezi, 2001).

When you visit a Transylvanian Unitarian church you will not see any crosses or pictures of Jesus because the tradition is clear that Jesus was not God. "Egy Az Isten" (pronounced edge oz eeshten) - God is One - is carved over almost every door. The religious symbol is not the Flaming Chalice, though because of the international connections through the Partner Church Program and the International Council of Unitarian and Universalists, many, if not most, Transylvanian Hungarians recognize the Flaming Chalice as a Unitarian symbol. The symbol for Hungarian Unitarians, both in Transylvania and in Hungary, is the dove and the serpent, reminding people to be wise as the serpent and gentle as the dove. It is a symbol far older than the Flaming Chalice.

The Bible is held in great reverence as a source of truth and a guide to human beings. To Transylvanian Unitarians, it is an inspiration from which ethical and spiritual encouragement can be drawn. It is not accepted blindly or literally, but under the guidance of reason and conscience.

For Unitarians everywhere religion is a matter of deeds, not creeds. Transylvanian Unitarians are no exception. "The real purpose of religion is not to prepare people for another life, but to inspire them to live this life as it ought to be lived. This is why Transylvanian Unitarianism is a life-centered religious movement" (Rezi, 2001). Worship is very important to Transylvanian Unitarians.

For us in Transylvania, worship is the reality, the act of being religious, and we consider worship to be the most important part of our religious life... Our Unitarianism is theistic Unitarianism, based not on the dogmas of Christianity, but on the values. The values of Christianity provide the main features of our worship. This means that in our worship the main purpose is to open up the spirit towards the divine and to create some connectedness with the transcendent; while at the same time being connected with fellow

worshippers, worshipping together with us.

For us worship is not simply joyful, happy, tolerant, (and) easy-going...when we think about holy and divine things, we tend to be serious. This is the seriousness of compassion and of being in love. So for us worship is to celebrate and to feel this celebration as something which lifts us beyond ourselves and connects us to our higher self and to the higher reality.

The structure of our worship is focused. So we have prayers said by the minister and we have many hymns. Our tradition is the European Christian tradition where worship is led by the minister, but in our new liturgy, being Unitarians, we try to involve members of the congregation more with saying certain prayers together, and by allowing them space to participate. Since we are the heirs of the rationalist and humanist heritage, the sermon remains the main part of our worship pointing us towards the divine and the transcendent. In my conviction, worship is a unique opportunity for everyone to find himself, to find the 'other' person, to find the divine, and through the divine to find the spirit of life. So that's why, when I'm leading worship, when I'm taking part in worship, even when I'm joyful, even when I'm laughing, or whatever I'm doing, I feel the seriousness of worship.

(Kovacs, 2001)

Preaching in the church is predominantly practical rather than doctrinal. Study and practices are based on the Protestant Bible, the Transylvanian Unitarian hymnbook and other books deemed useful. The hymnbook includes hymns from the 16th century through the ages to recent times. Folk songs may be sung at special church occasions. The order of service is usually an introductory hymn, a second hymn, a prayer, recitation of the Lord's Prayer/Our Father, a third hymn, a Bible reading (related to the sermon), the sermon, a silent prayer, a closing prayer, and a blessing. Services other than Sundays and holidays include baptisms (christenings), confirmation, Lord's Supper (communion), wedding ceremonies and funeral services. All of these serve to strengthen the spiritual, moral and religious life of Transylvanian Unitarians.

Most Unitarians in Transylvania are Unitarian because they were born into Unitarian families, but it is through baptism that they become publicly recognized as members of the Unitarian Church. "Baptism does not make anyone a Christian. Baptism is merely a solemn expression on the part of parents and godparents that they appreciate their Christian Unitarian faith and want their children to grow up and live in that faith too" (Rezi, 2001).

At ages 14 to 16, Unitarian youth are confirmed in the church. Through confirmation they become independent members of the church and assume responsibility before God for their deeds and faithfulness. Preparing for confirmation can be a one to two year process. It involves, among other things, learning the church catechism. (See Hungarian Catechism at <http://www.unitarius.hu/english/catechism.html>) The Unitarian catechism is not a set of binding beliefs, or dogma, but a study of the Bible and Unitarian history and how these can guide their lives. The process of confirmation serves to strengthen their faith.

The Lord's Supper, or communion, is the liturgy through which Jesus's life, work and death are remembered. It is celebrated with bread and wine four times a year: at Easter, Pentecost, on Thanksgiving Day (the last Sunday of September), and on Christmas Sunday. The ritual is done in memory of Jesus and the Last Supper. Emphasis is on remembering Jesus's words to his community and on following his example in our own lives by creating a compassionate human community. It is a powerful and moving ritual, but is not viewed as a sacrament.

In the Transylvanian Unitarian catechism there is a short credo that is often recited at the closing of special services such as a funeral service:

I believe in One God, the creator of life, our caring Father.

I believe in Jesus, the best child of God, our true teacher.

I believe in the holy spirit.

I believe in the vocation of the Unitarian Church.

I believe in forgiveness and in eternal life.

Transylvanian Unitarianism is Christian but not trinitarian. God, Jesus and holy spirit are separate entities. Jesus was the son of God as we are all children of God. Holy spirit is the divine in each of us and in the world. Transylvanian Unitarians have hope that there is 'life eternal' but "stop short of expressing definite knowledge of the *what* or *where* of such existence. For many it [eternal life] is a positive belief that Life itself is eternal and that the soul is immortal" (Rezi,2001).

Unitarians in Transylvania are called to worship by the ringing of the church bell. They come together in community every Sunday and for holidays and special events. The holidays they celebrate remind us once again of the oak. Religious holidays are old and well-rooted. They are connected mostly with Jesus's life and are celebrated at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.