

Unitarian Colloquium Discussion Paper I, 7 April 2006, *'Canonicity and the Liberal Canonical Community'*

Canon and Community

The subject of this paper is religion: that is, the public and shared practice of spirituality. Pure inward mysticism falls outside of the scope of this discussion. The present crisis in Unitarianism is primarily a crisis in community, with religious relativism failing to provide cohesion beyond political manoeuvre. What, then, should be the basis of Unitarian unity and identity? The answer suggested here is that Unitarianism can best comprise a church or canonical community bearing a particular kind of liberal relationship with the Christian scriptural canon and its diverse commentary. Canonicity is the yardstick, or regulative quality of a text, and the canon is composed of indispensable or significant prose and verse. The canonical community consists of individuals who respect the canonicity of a group of texts and act accordingly. Note that it is not necessary for the periphery of a canon to be fixed, so long as there is a core with recognised priority. Gandhi and Tolstoy are certainly to be brought forwards in the context of the problems and challenges of the testaments. The liberal character of the Unitarian canonical community describes the mode of acceptance by which Unitarians recognise their texts. The liberal canon is indefinitely open to criticism and commentary, and therefore always interpretively provisional, but core texts do have an indispensable voice, a right to be heard.

Liberal canonicity casts scripture as a partner, and the course of dialogue between community and canon generates persuasive force, which is the legitimate form of authority. Persuasion is fundamental to the possibility of liberalism and helps to explain why the canon has to be received by a community and not a solitary. There is no canonicity outside of the canonical community. Clearly, a liberal conception of canonicity rests on the distinction between persuasion and coercion, and therefore on the desirability of rational and just argument. To defend this conception against both dogmatism and relativism it is necessary to go back to the inheritance that Unitarianism is in danger of relinquishing: the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Justice, Reason and the legacy of Enlightenment

I fully understand the point of a parish priest who keeps a register of births and deaths, who collects alms for the poor, who comforts the sick, who brings peace to families, but what is the use of theologians? What is the advantage to society, when it has been well understood that an angel is infinite, *secundum quid*, that Scipio and Cato are damned because they were never Christians, and that there is an essential difference between *categoromatic* and *syncategoromatic*?¹

The European Enlightenment understood that the illegitimate exercise of religious power rested on the abuse of religious language. As Voltaire put it, the madman who spends two years regurgitating scholastic idiocies struts and administers, ‘and this is the school of bedlam that leads to fame and fortune’.² Mystification and jargon are the keys to status and control, and so become the jealous property of initiates. The aim of Enlightenment was to purify and simplify this ‘religion of sophists’, leaving ‘natural, divine religion’ to fulfil its proper moral function. Men and women must be able to speak sincerely before they can believe sincerely.³ All antique theological opacity, all inducements offered by establishments, and all fear and dissembling arising from oaths and tests were to be swept away as distortions of sincere and authentic expression.⁴ In this one can see a natural extension of the purified confessional impulse of the Protestant Reformation.

Yet the project of sincere speaking was intended to *improve* the forging of a common religious discourse, not to negate it. If you really meant something to be true you could not hold it casually or cynically or think it to be impossible: sincerity implied integrity between one’s opinion and one’s best reason. One could not practise or cultivate one’s own reason without recognising reason in others through the language of mutual

¹ Voltaire, ‘The A B C, or Dialogues between A B C, translated from the English by Mr Huet’ [1768] in D. Williams (trans. & ed.), *Voltaire: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/CUP, 1994), p.145

² *ibid.* Compare Rousseau, who condemned church autonomy but also distinguished between a state civil cult and pure religion of the heart, the latter suitable for Christianity: ‘The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right’ [1762] in G.D.H. Cole (trans.), *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Discourses* (Letchworth: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1963), pp.106-115

³ See T. Paine’s attack on ‘mental lying’, Preface to Part I, *Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* [1794] (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1988), p.50

⁴ The case is elaborated in W. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* [third ed., 1798] (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), pp.311-321, 555-593. See also J. Priestley, ‘An Essay on the First Principles of Government, and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty, including Remarks on Dr Brown’s *Code of Education* and on Dr Balguy’s Sermon on Church Authority [second ed., 1771] in P. Miller (ed.) *Priestley: Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) pp.64-69

reasoning.⁵ In effect, one could not reasonably hold an opinion that could not be tested and discussed (that is, hold such an inviolate opinion and remain fully reasonable). Integrity of ideas required reason and therefore rested on scrutability - ratiocination was not simply an epistemic exercise, but a moral one too. Such insistence on the rational-ethical clarification of discourse was the real achievement of the Enlightenment, to be distinguished from the wide range of metaphysical claims made by various enlightened thinkers.⁶ As reason precipitated an extended process of sociable inquiry, so it implied exposure to the ideas of others and the possibility of rational modification. Thus a doctrine that was unintelligible or prohibited to others was inadmissible.

Kant noticed that the rational criticism was a process of justice, analogous both to the fair interplay of voices in a free state and to the deliberation of a court of law. Criticism preserved reason from the war of dogmatic dispute.⁷ To put this enlightened conception in a biblical register, justice in ideas no less than any other kind of justice demands that the judge be no respecter of persons.⁸ Judgment and discrimination are unavoidable, but they are a risky business demanding both caution and candour, for the measure given is the measure received.⁹ Speaking in the general context of discourse, one can say that respect has two meanings: civility or courtesy in exchange (abstinence from violence, abuse or other conduct with no rational weight) and privileging of ideas according to personal status, emotion or property. The first kind of respect - really respect for argument itself - is indispensable if debate is to proceed: but the second, non-procedural respect for persons is interdicted if ideas are to be treated fairly.

With this in view it should be clear that relativism no less than dogmatism constitutes injustice to ideas and a betrayal of the legacy of Enlightenment. The juxtaposition of spiritualities amounts to little without their mutual dialogue and rational modification, and the plain claim of offence ('you have offended my sense of identity') has no argumentative weight whatsoever. One should care about the hurt and indignation of one's neighbour as a matter of charity, however irrational this may be, but one should not allow the pursuit of intellectual justice to be intimidated by it. While public religious

⁵ Even in Kant reason must always be subject to the necessary discipline of criticism. See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781] trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (Letchworth: Aldine Press, 1969), 'The Discipline of Pure Reason in Polemics', pp.422-432

⁶ Ranging, for example, from the revived Platonism of Shaftesbury to the atheistic scepticism of David Hume.

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.423, 429

⁸ Deut. 16:19; 2 Chron. 19:7; in the Christian New Testament Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; also Apocrypha, Eccles. 35:12. The same biblical phrase and criterion of disregard for persons is adopted by Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.423

⁹ CNT, Matt. 7:2

argument is always provisional, it remains the case that beliefs and practices at any given moment can be compared according to their integrity and *some* degree of discrimination realised by rational criteria. For example: an internally coherent belief is preferable to an incoherent one; a belief that accounts for all the phenomena it purports to interpret is preferable to one that does not; and a belief that interprets phenomena with fewer assumptions is more effective than a doctrine that adduces more assumptions to account for the same phenomena. Arguments arising from such criteria might well be intricate and indecisive: but they are substantive debates marked by the real possibility of some ideas being found to have more integrity than others.

The Enlightenment stood for the rational re-ordering of speech, not the disorder of speech itself. Why is such rational re-ordering desirable? After all, rational inquiry strives to avoid the certain untruth of inconsistency and irrelevance, but there is no final guarantee of truth through ratiocination. A coherent, exhaustive and economical account might yet be mistaken, and dogmatic pronouncement might hit upon the truth by luck (hence the provisional aspect of mutual reason). In practice, rational inquiry always leads to a pluralism of views. What is really at stake here is justice to ideas, or *fair hearing*. The objection to the person who refuses fair hearing to her ideas ('my ideas seem right to me, who are you to judge?') or fair hearing to the ideas of others ('well that's just your opinion and I refuse to entertain it') is that she is behaving unjustly. Relativism is wrong because it is unfair.

The Enlightenment was never solely, or most importantly, an epistemic project: it was a moral endeavour seeking justice, and intellectual justice through the fair hearing of ideas. A rational belief – one that does not make contradictory or unfulfilled or redundant claims about itself – is preferable to an irrational belief because it possesses greater integrity. It minimises mental lying. An honest rational mistake is only ever temporary, in principle, because it admits the possibility of future amendment. Take two people who think that Alexander the Great is a benevolent god on the basis of the beautiful cities he founded. Both are then presented with evidence of the appalling slaughter perpetrated by the conqueror. The first person who tries to square this information with Alexander's godly beneficence through a reasoned theodicy, perhaps by modifying his original position (eg. 'Alexander's goodness requires that he punish the deserving victims of his wars') or by admitting that the exercise is impossible and his original belief erroneous, behaves more honestly than the second person who either refuses to hear the new evidence or states the contradiction without trying to come to terms with the dilemma. Both are interested in the

truth of the situation, but the immediate moral distinction between them is one of integrity realised through fair hearing.

This point can be pressed further. Under most circumstances a reasoned belief will have greater truth content than an unreasoned one, if only because many sources of untruth are usually avoided. However, the decisive aspect of reason is moral: reason is fairer than unreason. Intellectual fairness has an intrinsic value beyond its instrumental use in establishing the truth. Its practice is a virtue in itself and it achieves integrity. A process of fair reasoning is always to be preferred to relativistic or dogmatic assertion alone. This applies even if (hypothetically) the assertion is true by revelation or luck. One can surmise that the conditions by which one could ‘know’ such unreasoned truth would themselves be rationally decisive, or else that justice and truth form part of the same ontology and never fundamentally conflict. Such an order is proposed in the Bible, where ‘Justice, justice you shall pursue’ is a revealed command.¹⁰ Yet even assuming, for the sake of argument, that a ‘truth’ is manifested arbitrarily, one should still try to approach it through reason (and refuse to accept it solely on an arbitrary basis) because we become unjust when we defer to unreason.

For the enlightened thinkers, indifference to injustice, no less than its perpetration, was to be despised. What people thought and did mattered: injustice needed to be fought and exposed. The duty of dissemination, of public reason, comprised participation in the moral world. It is a mistake to think of enlightened reason as a passive propositional process: or rather of enlightened proposition disengaged from moral commitment. Voltaire’s *Écrasez L’Infâme!* (‘Extinguish Infamy’!) set the stage for Kant’s *Sapere Aude* (‘Dare to Know’). Infamy was challenged by public reason: by investigation and publication – or ‘scholarship’ in the wide sense proposed by Kant.¹¹ The climacteric of Enlightenment was Voltaire’s exposure of the unjust trial and judicial murder of Jean Calas, who was broken on the wheel by the Toulouse *parlement* in 1762. Reason was forged in a morally committed battle with despotism. It was tempered in the midst of a ‘state of emergency’ later adumbrated in very different circumstances by Walter Benjamin.¹² There is a direct line between the literary exposures of Voltaire and the later challenges thrown down by Zola in the Dreyfus affair and by more recent dissenting opponents of fascism, Stalinism and imperialism. In contrast relativism is incapable of

¹⁰ Deut. 16:20

¹¹ I. Kant ‘What is Enlightenment?’ [1784] in L.W. Beck (trans. & ed.), *Kant on History* (London & New York, NY: Macmillan, 1963), pp.3-10

¹² W. Benjamin ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, VIII

challenging despotism because it eschews justice in ideas. Pursuing social and political justice is a moral duty that simply cannot be prosecuted on the basis of arbitrary or isolated assertion. Granted, the inherited prejudices of contemporary Unitarianism are liberal ones, but the grounds for their rational defence have been isolated, privatised, and surrendered.

Meanwhile, for all his vehement rejection of the Church (and contempt for the Judaism that he believed underpinned its authority) Voltaire behaved like a better Jew or Christian than his opponents when he stood up for Calas, Sirven, and the other victims of public turpitude. Would that a Voltaire had been present to pursue Pilate and the priests after the execution of Jesus! The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was an archetype of public or representative injustice. All the elements were present: trumped-up evidence; murder for the ‘greater good’; the collusion of authority and mob populism; moral relativism and cowardice (‘What is truth?’) and abuse of process. The crucifixion was a sign of the destruction of justice. The resurrection represents the defeat of this destruction, a sign that a Voltaire or a Zola can prevail.

Reason and the Canon

Thus far we have advanced a general moral defence of mutual reason. Assuming that justice is good, there is goodness in the practice of reason, which is justice in ideas. This fairness is absent in hierarchical or privatised assertion (dogma and relativism). It follows equally that the fair prosecution of any science and process of reasoned argument possesses an inherent goodness. The notion that science and criticism are morally neutral is mistaken. A piece of scientific research might or might not have beneficial consequences, but the process of rational inquiry proper to the discipline is a matter of giving ideas fair hearing. By this criterion, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ arguments really are good and bad (just and unjust) but genuinely bad arguments exist in this sense only if they refuse the pursuit of intellectual justice by violating the rules of mutual reasoning. Honest mistakes and practical pluralism are to be expected and they are liable to amendment. This means that there might well be good arguments that turn out to be incorrect: there is no shame in fairly and sincerely advancing something that might turn out to be untrue.

If this is the case with the sciences and criticism then it is also the case with religions. The primary standard being applied here is fair hearing. All science and literature begin with an axiomatic establishment of subject form: this is the material, and these are the problems, with which this discipline deals. This is legitimate contingency equivalent to

choice of topic, and is quite separate from the arbitrary refusal of reasoning *in* the identified subject. Fictional criticism and art appreciation produce fair arguments just as physics does, even though the metaphysical status of their subject material differs wildly. Within the universal standards of coherence and relevance that identify reason there are clearly particular patterns of exegesis and investigation appropriate to each domain. Every discipline has its canon, its subject matter and rules of investigation proper to the explanation of its own problems. In principle the same intellectual justice is available in chemistry as in Islamic jurisprudence. Canonical pluralism is an ethical artefact and in no way is to be confused with epistemic relativism. It is universally good that fair arguments are being produced according to the canon of each domain under the rule of reason. Just as it is no more possible to reason *tout court* than it is to speak ‘language’, reason requires a subject, and every enduring subject acquires a canon.

The Unitarian Canon and its Reason

The subject of the Unitarian canon is the divine unity, and its purpose is the worship of God in a liberal canonical community. This practice is sharply distinguished from that of illiberal canonical communities. Traditional religion has historically operated according to a nomothetic (that is legislative or jurisprudential) relationship between canon and canonical community. This has been especially true of Orthodox Judaism and Islam (through *halakha* and *sharia*). Catholicism has also developed conceptions of living by a Rule, both in the consecrated orders (where members are sometimes actually referred to as ‘canons’) and the wider church governed by canon law. Another traditional mode has been hieratic: using the canon to elevate a priestly mediating caste. This has become residual in Judaism, but remains central to apostolic Christianity. The focus is not on lawmaking but on investing special individuals and hierarchies with communal power. The third traditional mode constituting canonical communities has been credal: enforcing common propositional statements and rituals. This has, if anything, become more important across most of modern Protestantism as the other modes have been diminished or jettisoned. Because Unitarianism arose as a branch of the radical Reformation its non-credalism has normally been emphasised: but its rejection of nomothetic and hieratic sanction is just as important.

In contrast, the Unitarian church is gathered liberally. The nature of its community is essentially expressed in the first two paragraphs of the opening declaration of the Unitarian Christian Association:

We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Rule of Christian Faith and Duty under the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That it is the inalienable right of every Christian to search these records of Divine Truth for his own instruction and guidance, to form his own opinions with regard to what they teach and to worship God in sincerity agreeably to the dictates of his own conscience without privation or the inconvenience inflicted by his fellow man.¹³

The right of individual judgement of the scriptural canon is subsequently balanced by a commitment to ‘free inquiry and discussion’. The liberal freedom desired is not only freedom from interpretive coercion but also the freedom to profess and share interpretation. Indeed continuing discussion or dialogue is a duty constitutive of the canonical community. For ‘liberal’ does not only have Liberty as its noun, but also Liberality: that is, munificence and generosity. The liberal canonical community demands generosity and justice in the granting of fair hearing. It is fairer, and therefore better than the illiberal modes of community identified above. Unitarianism requires the giving, the sharing of interpretation, and the fair negotiation of ideas and practices according to congregational democratic polity. Democracy is both generous and just. Generosity also prompts reasonable conduct deriving from giving respect to others. On somewhat different grounds, the philosopher John Rawls has described reasonable people as being ready ‘to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so. Those norms they view as reasonable for everyone to accept and therefore as justifiable to them: and they are ready to discuss the fair terms that others propose.’¹⁴ Jesus put it rather more succinctly when he urged that you should do to others as you would have them do to you.¹⁵

The substance of the canon

The body of any canon has a determinate history of discussion and commentary. The full exercise of reason depends on the widest possible span of interlocution, and dialogue with

¹³ UCA Trust Deed Opening Declaration.

¹⁴ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1996), p.49

¹⁵ Luke 6:31

the past is just as important as conversation with the present. In the words of an old opponent, it describes a partnership not only between those who are living, but also between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.¹⁶ In practice, what this means is that the bible and then the history of Christian thought should be recognised as the tradition of the Church and Unitarians should enter into a living relationship with it of reverent and critical study and discussion. The importance of *Unitarian* Christianity is that it preserves an interrogation of western culture and a pathway through Jesus, the Law and the Prophets, to God. The tradition worth preserving is *Unitarian Christianity* because Unitarianism deracinated from its Judaic and Christian roots has no depth or continuity. Deism as a radical interpretation of Rational Christianity has persisted since the Radical Reformation. However, the anti-biblical natural theology of Tom Paine and Robespierre did not survive the fifty years following the French Revolution. Fragments of philosophical or theosophical unitarianism can be extracted from the archive, but these do not represent the fullest sort of religious speech possessing continuity of commentary, discussion and cross-reference. It might be possible to institute a Neo-Platonic conventicle, for example, but such an exercise would be just as artificial as the establishment of Welsh ‘Druidry’ was for the Romantics.¹⁷

Christianity has traditionally refused the label of Religion of the Book, but it has always claimed to be the way of the Word.¹⁸ ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’.¹⁹ Thus begins the Johannine meditation on the Christological Genesis. Each of the Gospel prologues reveals a different aspect of the Word in its originating force. The beginning of Mark is the prophetic Writ, the foretelling of a voice in the desert clearing the way for the Lord.²⁰ In Matthew, the first word shows the generational situation of the Christ in the sacred genealogy of Israel.²¹ For Luke, the ‘servants of the word’ are links in a chain of transmission: the Word is presented as a historical account.²² Thus the Gospels commence by showing the creative, prophetic, genealogical and historical notes of the Word of God. The Word is active, not passive, and it continues to unfold. Engagement with the canon is participation in the Word and

¹⁶ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790] (Stanford, Cal., 2001) ed. J.C.D. Clark

¹⁷ P. Morgan, ‘From a Death to a View: the Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period’ in E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.43-100, esp. pp.62-6.

¹⁸ For example in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Cassell, 1994), para. 108, p.30

¹⁹ John 1:1; cf. Gen. 1:1-5

²⁰ Mark 1:1-4; paraphrasing Is. 40:3 and Mal. 3:1

²¹ Matt. 1:1-17

²² Luke 1:1-4

constitutes a form of worship in itself. Commentary and study is one way in which Christians can join, or participate in, the Church, and it may in fact be the distinctive Unitarian way. Rituals and moral works too are a kind of performative commentary. The suggestion here is that Unitarianism is distinctive as a Reading Church, where reading is understood as an active mode of reflection, conversation and practice. For it is through enactment in the imagination and practice that participation occurs. The response of the imagination is free, but the basic form or structure of the conversation - the point of departure - is ordered by rational deliberation on the Word of God.

As with all monotheism, the subject of the Unitarian canon is the divine unity, which imposes limitation and modesty in predication, but also overarching extent of reference, across its pattern of reason. Regarding limitation, the transcendence of God means that despite appearances to the contrary, one monotheistic faith can never be said to decisively contradict another. It cannot be otherwise given the allusive and partial character of religious language. In a rough analogy, it makes as much sense to worry that Goethe's *Faust* contradicts Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. There is complement and tension between them. Nevertheless, they both share the same dramatic subject. Philosophies, or religions, that do not consider God (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism) or that spend time describing partial spirit beings (animism, fetishism) are simply less informative about Him. They may reveal important truths about the way the universe or moral world is, but they are at a remove from the essential subject. God discloses different aspects of his being through the different monotheistic faiths that speak of Him: no monotheism is exhaustive, as no finite description can be given of the infinite divine unity.

On the other hand, any statement about any subject carries some minimal truth about God as part of the totality of meaning knowable only to God. This totality comprises every proposition, sentiment and utterance conceivable in any language, including every yearning and inarticulate feeling or impulse. Even the latter are communicative in nature, howsoever interiorised, because they are known both to the subject and to God. Though unimaginably vast, the total hermeneutic set is not unbounded. One can say that this totality is the Word or Wisdom of creation, the first-made encompassing archetype. Beyond all meaning, word and creation there is a superabundance of God. Any statement about God carries some more definite truth about God - but *how* this truth is carried (how it relates to all other possible statements about God) is not necessarily known, and might be quite other than the way in which the speaker intended it. For example, I say that there is no God:

scripture observes that I must be either wicked or foolish.²³ This is part of an extensive chain of argument and counter-argument. The denial that God exists, or derision or condemnation of God, itself carries potential meaning about God, and this meaning can only be comprehended in the ordered, open and just unfolding of the canon.

[Joe Bord, 16/3/2006]

²³ Ps. 10:4, 14:1