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## Unitarian Colloquium Discussion Paper II, 7 April 2006

### *A PATTERNED INTEGRITY*

### *God, Jesus/The Christ and the Holy Spirit*

### *A Prolegomena to any future Unitarian Christian Theology*

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One of the best known statements made by our liberal religious movement was that we were seeking to spread Christianity ‘in its most simple and intelligible form.’<sup>1</sup> This was a concise expression of a project designed to ensure that the religious givens/revelations<sup>2</sup> found in our scripture (our canon) were consistently and coherently explored and explained, not only in their own terms, but also in relationship with the discoveries continually being made in other fields of human enquiries: in the arts, humanities and sciences. The endeavour was designed to show how Christian belief (at least in its most simple and intelligible form) was coherent, rational and reasonable. This paper stands in that tradition.

What I hope to show is that as twenty-first century Unitarian Christians, although we cannot (and no one person or community can) see Reality/God in its/‘his’ completeness it remains perfectly possible to say, clearly and coherently, something truthful about the nature of Reality/God. I am claiming very strongly that our own liberal Unitarian Christian faith can offer, from our viewpoint or, to borrow a phrase from Richard Holloway, from ‘our bend in the river,’<sup>3</sup> a coherent, sufficient, compelling, and true theological expression of how we can encounter and live appropriately in response to Reality/God. Continual conversations with other communities occupying different ‘bends in the river’ are always required to ensure that our perspective on Reality/God is not unduly distorted but, as we do this, it remains true that we must still live in a fulfilled fashion on the bend in the river where we find ourselves. I maintain, along with the Psalmist, that for us “the lines have fallen for [us] in pleasant places; yea, [we] have a goodly heritage” (Ps. 16:6).

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<sup>1</sup> The Hibbert Trust was founded in 1853 as a result of the will of Robert Hibbert, a Unitarian who wished the fund to be applied in ways which the Trustees held “to be the most conducive to the spread of Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form, and to the unfettered exercise of private judgement in matters of religion.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that our tradition has consistently believed that Divine Revelation occurred but, and it is a vital ‘but,’ this revelation always occurred through humanity and its truth was, therefore, always to be tested by human reason.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Holloway *Doubts and Loves – What is Left of Christianity* (Cannongate, Edinburgh 2001) p. 5

I can begin now with a story important to the structure of this paper which was told to me about the inventor Buckminster Fuller. It seems that, when teaching, he was fond of holding up his hand and asking people, “What is this?” Not surprisingly, nearly always they would answer, “A hand!” Fuller would reply by explaining that, since the cells which made up his hand were continually dying and renewing, a hand which seemed fixed to us was, in truth, continually changing. He reminded his students that any *living system* is not a static *thing*. “What you see is not a hand,” Fuller would continue, “it is a *‘patterned integrity,’* the universe’s capability to create hands.”<sup>4</sup>

My point today, drawing on Fuller’s image, is that God creates, not only hands as patterned integrities, but also religious communities and traditions. As Unitarian Christians we are one of the many beautiful patterned integrities that God has called into existence from the beginning of time. This is another way of saying that we have received and responded to a call from God to develop a particular and distinctive way of worshipping and living—we have become a certain kind of community and not another. Once a hand becomes a hand it cannot later become an eye nor a foot or a nose! To try to change us into something other than what we have become would be to destroy our basic integrity and result in our ultimate demise.

The contemporary Unitarian Christian theologian George Kimmich Beach offers us another useful analogy. He points out that when,

. . . as a potter you form a lump of clay, you make many decisions, exercising your freedom both consciously and instinctively, to one end, a finished ceramic. [. . .] The original decision in pottery making is not unlike the original decision in faith: once a direction is set, soon it will be too late to change your mind. Choosing a bowl excludes a pitcher. Now choices are being made within an ever narrowing range; necessity is closing in on the maker. But this is the miracle of creation: a reversal is also in progress, for the embrace of necessity gives birth to a greater freedom. With each new choice, new, more refined choices arise; creative freedom I growing exponentially. [. . .] The perfect end to the exercise of freedom is perfect necessity. We think: This bowl, or this life, can only be what it must be!<sup>5</sup>

To return us to Fuller’s analogy we may add to Beach’s list that, “*We think: this hand, our own Unitarian Christian patterned integrity, can only be what it must be!*” However, as Fuller’s analogy reveals, although we are limited in a very real way by the basic nature of our patterned integrity, because it is a living thing and not a bowl or a

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<sup>4</sup> For Buckminster Fullers full discussion of this idea see *Synergetics – Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking* (Macmillan, New York and London, 1975) pp. 226-228

<sup>5</sup> George Kimmich Beech’s essay *The Covenant of Spiritual Freedom* found in Walter P. Hertz, *Redeeming Time* (Skinner House Books, Boston, 1999) p. 103-104

pitcher, its constituent material (i.e. each new generation which joins it) is constantly changing and renewing! This brings our patterned integrity new life and vigour and spurs us on to discover new ways in which it can explore the world. Our ‘hand’ is ‘free’ to find new hands to hold, to experience new sensations, to learn to hold a pen or develop new tools. It cannot be stressed enough, of course, that our freedom *does not* extend to becoming something other than a hand.

So despite its necessary limitation our patterned integrity remains very free—indeed true freedom in the finite world is dependent upon the limitations offered by patterned integrities. Consequently we meddle with their structured integrity at our peril and we should avoid any attempt to introduce anything *genuinely* alien and ultimately destructive to them. Clearly one such introduction to our own patterned integrity would be to attempt to develop anew an ‘orthodox’ dogmatic Unitarian Christian theology. Whilst it is true that we could, as Joe Bord noted in his essay published in the winter edition of *The Herald*, imagine founding *de novo*, a “dogmatic, biblical Arianism or Socinianism” it would only be at “the cost of grievous damage to the way in which historical Unitarian Christianity has actually developed.”<sup>6</sup> I, like Joe, think that a fundamental aspect of our patterned integrity “does not lie in a closed system of propositions but as “an historically extended way of thinking and acting manifests its truth.”<sup>7</sup> James Luther Adams, perhaps our greatest twentieth-century theologian, certainly recognised this when he stated that “nothing significant has ever been achieved in human history except through long-standing continuities.”<sup>8</sup>

But it is vital to recall that when we say that we manifest our truth through an “historically extended way of thinking and acting” we are not saying at the same time that we are merely an insubstantial *process*. We forget at our peril that in order to seek God as a human community through an always unfolding yet continuous and coherent *process* we must have substantive tangible and ultimately stable *form* which facilitates this life. We need to be something that does not, at heart, change.

Our basic fixed form is given to us by our canon—essentially the Old and New Testaments interpreted in the manner outlined in Joe Bord’s paper, by a *Reading Church*. We share something of our basic form with Judaism (the Old Testament) but we share it wholly with all forms of Christianity.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Herald*, No. 60, Winter 2005

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> James Luther Adams in his essay *The Liberal Christian Holds up the Mirror in An Examined Faith* (Beacon Press, Boston Mass, 1991) p. 320.

In this paper I am going to only going to consider certain aspects of the three most central canonical concepts which firstly, gave us a general Christian pattern (rather than a Jewish one) and then secondly, as our communities freely interpreted them (in the spirit expressed in the opening words of the Unitarian Christian Association's *Declaration of Trust*<sup>9</sup>), eventually gave us a *Unitarian* Christian patterned integrity rather than a Trinitarian one: they are the concepts of God, Jesus/the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

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## GOD

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As its name implies, any Unitarian Christian theology must begin with a basic truth claim about the Oneness and Unity of God—a claim which is central to our canon. The traditional statement of faith we point to is that made by Jesus in the first of his two great commandments (Mark 2:29-30): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Jesus affirmed this, of course, because it stands at the beginning of the central statement of his own Jewish faith, the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4ff). The oneness of God is also affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament, specifically in the letters of Paul (Romans 3:30; Galatians 3:20), in the letter of James (2:19) and in the already quoted deuterio-Pauline letter to the Ephesians (4:6). Our insistence on God's Unity, over and against any theology which threatened that, shaped us decisively.

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

That the imposition of Human Tests and Confessions of Faith, and the vain efforts of men to produce an unattainable uniformity of belief have tended to restrict the sacred right of private judgement and to prevent that free inquiry and discussion which are essential to the extension of religious knowledge.

That forasmuch as the Master, Christ, has described the true disciple in these words, saying, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another”, and further, has emphasised the two great commandments, saying “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these”; and forasmuch as Christ himself has said, “Not everyone that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven”.

We, therefore, refuse to impose conditions upon the Church which He, Himself, has not sanctioned, and we solemnly declare our allegiance to the principle - as the real bond of union between Christians - that the teaching of Christ Himself must take precedence of the doctrine of a later time, and that unity is to be sought, not in uniformity of creed, but in a common standard of righteousness and obedience to the commandments which Christ Himself has laid down.

It is clear that any theology we produce in the future must continue clearly to affirm this belief. I'll say no more about God here but will return to the subject in the fourth section below. The reason for separating out my discussion of God is because our Unitarian Christian understanding of God's Unity is utterly dependent upon the fact that *our* knowledge of the One God came through Jesus (considered both as a man and, as we shall see in an extended and intimately connected way, through the Christ.). To clarify this vitally important point I conclude this section with some words of the influential liberal English Jewish theologian, Claude G. Montefiore (1858-1938) who observed in his book, "The Synoptic Gospels":

The Christian, even the Unitarian Christian, has received the highest conceptions of God and righteousness through Jesus. To the Christian, alike in his teaching and in his personality and life, Jesus reveals God. To the Christian, even the Unitarian Christian, the N[ew] T[estament] is the book which tells him most truly and fully about the goodness and God, and within the N[ew] T[estament] it is the Gospels which tell him best of all. He fits Jesus with his purest thoughts of God; Jesus brings God near to him. Whereas to the Jews, Jesus – or any man – would be in their way in their relations with, and in their approaches to, God, to the Christian, even to the Unitarian Christian, Jesus smoothes the way to God and shortens it. He is the way. Without Jesus – if that fatality could for a moment be conceived – God, even to the Unitarian Christian would be more distant and more dim; without Jesus, God to the Jew, would be no less near and no less bright.<sup>10</sup>

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## JESUS & THE CHRIST

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In any balanced Christianity (Trinitarian or Unitarian), Jesus' *person, role and teachings* offered those who encountered him (either directly or, like us, through our canon and the historically extended patterned integrity known as the Body of Christ) a unique and distinctive window into the ultimate Reality—into the very Godhead itself.<sup>11</sup> This particular window has, in turn, given *all forms* of Christianity their distinctive shape, function and form.

However, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards Unitarian Christianity began increasingly to concentrate on an attempt to uncover what it believed would eventually be an *historically* accurate picture of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>12</sup> In that historical search we learnt,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Edward Kessler's *A English Jew – The Life and Writings of Claude Montefiore* (Valentine Mitchell, London 2002) pp. 57-58

<sup>11</sup> We might usefully spend some time re-exploring the possibilities of the word *icon* being used to describe Jesus/the Christ as the window *through* which we see God/Reality.

<sup>12</sup> It is clear today that this project, in all its historical stages, can only ever offer up incomplete and often conflicting biographies of Jesus. They may contain great insights but remain wholly incomplete in

of course, much which we would today consider indispensable—most notably that Jesus was not a Christian (in the sense that the word later came to mean) but instead a faithful Jew of his own time (albeit a socially, politically and spiritually radical one). Unfortunately, however, an inevitable by-product of this historical project was so to over-emphasise Jesus’ moral teachings that we began to lose any sense of the importance of Jesus’ *person and role* and to forget that “the crowds were astounded at his teaching, *for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes*” (Matthew 7:28-29) – i.e. it wasn’t just Jesus’ teachings that carried weight. Nevertheless, many of our ministers and communities began to believe (following the ideas of Theodore Parker) that Jesus simply taught “pure religion” and that this was what Unitarianism was, or at least should aspire to be.

Although it is clearly possible to claim that Jesus’ moral teachings have an independent and universal applicability, in our own pluralistic age the idea of there being one true “pure religion” (and that based only upon Jesus’ moral teachings) is wholly unsustainable. We are increasingly aware that that any genuine religious tradition is much more than the holding of a set of (supposedly) universally applicable moral teachings. They are instead patterned integrities which engage the *whole* person in an *historically extended* community dwelling on a particular ‘bend in the river’ and which have inherited a complex range of speech-acts (i.e. particular and unique scriptures, prayers and rituals) that help them explore Reality *together* using a *shared language*. Christianity, in any of its forms (including its Unitarian form), is much more than just holding to the abstract truth of Jesus’ moral precepts in an attempt to create a so-called “pure” or “universal” religion.

The pressing question, therefore, seems to me to be how we might go about restoring, in ways consistent with our historically extended tradition, a theology which takes seriously Jesus’ *person and role* and not just his teachings. I strongly suggest that a central task for us must be the re-exploration of an idea we inherit from Faustus Socinus concerning the *divinity of Jesus’ office or role*.<sup>13</sup> So, whilst we must continue to affirm Jesus’ full humanity and to be clear that he was not, *in himself*, divine, we should consider restoring in ourselves a sense of the divinity found in *his office or role* and so once more come to understand him as being, *for us*, God’s Chosen/Anointed (i.e. the

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themselves. For a full guide on the various stages of this historical search see Gerd Theissen and Annette Mertz *The Historical Jesus* (SCM, London 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Rees, Thomas (trans.) *The Racovian Catechism* (1605) (London 1818, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown).

Messiah/Christ). This would necessarily involve some kind of re-exploration of an Adoptionist theology in which Jesus is understood by us as being *God's adopted son* with a particular divine *role* rather than as being uniquely the *Son of God by nature*. I should add here the thought that, as a community, we would also be playing an active role in this with *our own decision* to accept Jesus held this office.

An important concept to hold in mind in any such exploration is that, whereas for Trinitarian Christians Jesus Christ *changed* Reality, for the Unitarian Christian he simply (albeit astonishingly and even uniquely) *revealed* something of God's eternal unchanging Reality. The Reality/God he revealed was only partly understood by those who knew him when he was alive and it was only after he died that his intimate group of disciples began truly to glimpse the depth of this revelation. In the events of the Resurrection (however that is interpreted) the first disciples discovered that Jesus' *revealing quality* was not lost to them but still present in and about them under the form they came to call the *risen Christ*. The 'risen Christ' it should be noted had for them both a temporal, finite, external quality (i.e. the disciples encountered 'Jesus' in some recognizable human form after his death) and also an eternal, internal and mystical quality (the disciples and early Christian community later coming to understand themselves to constitute the 'body of Christ' and to have his 'mind').

As Saint Paul realized, in the body of:

Christ Jesus . . . [we] are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

And the body of Christ (which is to say the time bound church in all its forms) is, for Christians, simply an earthly (and therefore partial) model of what belonging to the ultimate and absolute patterned integrity or community—the kingdom of Heaven/ God—is like.

In our concentration upon the historical Jesus we have very nearly lost any sense of this. Consequently, an intimately connected issue I believe we as Unitarian Christians must address more clearly and confidently is the matter of how we understand the relationship between the *Jesus of history* and the *Christ of faith*. Cliff Reed, in one of his hymns, has expressed this poetically and I call upon us to consider its implications far more deeply than we have done for a least a century:

JESUS died, but Christ has triumphed.  
Broken now the chains of death:  
From the tomb comes God's anointed.  
Kindling cold hearts with his breath.

Now at last we see his purpose,  
Breaking through like sunburst bright:  
Liberation for God's people  
Ends humanity's long night.

For there is a Spirit greater,  
Who has now the victory;  
And our God indwells the human,  
Striving for our liberty.

And that Spirit dwelt in Jesus,  
Teaching us that love redeems;  
How God, through a man's compassion,  
Gains great ends by human means.

But for love and life undying  
Death of self must be the key;  
Jesus died to bear this witness  
And Christ rose to make us free.

I believe that what this hymn attempts to articulate in poetic form we, in our lives and preaching as theologians and ministers, must also articulate. With greater clarity and confidence we must begin to find ways to explain how we understand ourselves as a genuine *Christ centered community* and not simply as a *Jesus centered theistic community*. A genuine Unitarian Christian community needs to recognize and proclaim once more the importance of *Christ* and, therefore, the centrality of Easter and the Resurrection in its faith (although admittedly in language that can speak to our own secular age). We must explore how we may come to live once more as an Easter people.

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## HOLY SPIRIT

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Above all else the Holy Spirit provides us with the common thread which links all things together in and through relationship with/in the One God. As Arthur Long, our own much loved and respected British Unitarian Christian theologian, noted “[t]he idea of the Holy Spirit is one of those essentially true Hebraic elements within Christianity—a vivid symbol of the tremendous idea of the Living God, the Lord and Giver of Life the driving force behind the universe, the Inspirer of men [and women] and the source and ground of

all supreme values.”<sup>14</sup> The Holy Spirit is what we saw in Jesus, it is what we saw in the risen Christ, and it is what we still see in our communities and ourselves.

Through contemplation of the action of the Holy Spirit (recorded in our canon) and through our community’s continued experience of it we have come to feel, along with one of our Universalist Christian forbears, George de Benneville (1703-1793), that “behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things.”<sup>15</sup> God’s Unity and Oneness seems to us to be *interdependent*—it is eternally active and creative; diverse, yet one.

In the next section I will offer some thoughts on what this insight might mean in direct relationship to our proclamation that God is One. But, before I move on, it is important suggest that fully developed Unitarian Christian theology of the Holy Spirit could also offer us a way of showing how God’s interdependent unity can be expressed to the world both in *particular and unique* ways as well as in *general and universal* ways and that these need not be mutually exclusive concepts. Our own patterned integrity’s ability to talk about, and to *continue to experience*, God’s *interdependent unity* cannot occur if we loose our own patterned integrity’s twin poles of particularity (the Jesus of history) on the one hand and, on the other, universality (the Christ of faith). Only a theology of the Holy Spirit can coherently link them in a manner that maintains God’s absolute Unity.

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## GOD

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All of the above allows me, briefly, further to consider what we might mean today when as Unitarian Christians we proclaim the One God and ‘his’ Unity. We need to be far more sensitive to this powerful idea of God’s *interdependent unity* which has its roots in the Pauline idea lying behind the verse from Ephesians (4:6) quoted earlier, that there is “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” St Paul himself summed it up in front of the Areopagus in Athens: “In [God] we live and move and have our being.”<sup>16</sup> Even as we retain the sense that God is greater than us and that we are not, ourselves, God, we have increasingly come to feel that creation—and, therefore, humankind—must be in some real way part of, or in, God ‘himself.’ There is no decisive

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur J. Long, *Faith and Understanding* (Lindsey Press, London 1963) p. 63

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in John Morgan’s *The Devotional Heart – Pietism and the Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House Books, Boston Mass. 1995) pp. 30-31

<sup>16</sup> Acts 17:28

break between us and God. For us, of course, Jesus (and, therefore, also the Christ) is the paradigmatic expression of this—in him we experienced God with us—Emmanuel. But again, as we affirm this, we need to be very careful to avoid anything approaching a Trinitarian doctrine.

I would strongly suggest, therefore, that in the coming century we should spend a considerable amount of time exploring the possibilities offered to us by at least three often overlapping philosophical positions:

- i. Pantheism (which asserts that the universe conceived of as a whole is God and, conversely, that there is no God but the combined substance, forces, and laws that are manifested in the existing universe).
- ii. Panentheism (which asserts that God includes the universe as a part, though not the whole, of his being).
- iii. Panpsychism (which asserts that a plurality of separate and distinct psychic beings or minds constitute Reality—a Reality which can, in certain interpretations, be considered One in the sense we could affirm. However, it would be a corporate Oneness in the sense of being a genuine community which is one though many—the concept of the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God clearly fit into this category).

As have all generations before us we must continually address closely the question of how the One God relates to the Many and vice versa, as well as how we experience, simultaneously, the transcendence and immanence of God and we should be doing this in and through the language of our canon. Such an exploration of the *interdependent unity* of God could also open the way for us to begin a rather more fruitful conversation with Trinitarian Christians than we have had for some centuries. It is clear that we are all grappling with the same complex issues and that we are doing this using a shared language centered upon God, Jesus/the Christ and Holy Spirit. All we would be saying in any such conversations is that we believe we have a rational, reasonable, coherent, simple and intelligible way of understanding the central concepts of our shared faith in the One God of All.

[Andrew James Brown 18/03/06]