

“Unitarian worship and Unitarian community – a personal vision”

**from a Worthship service led at Glasgow Unitarian Church
on 4 September 2011 by Barry Bell**

First thoughts

I would like to pass on a couple of insightful yet comic thoughts. The first jumped out to me from within a recent e-mail as being very appropriate for a community whose membership is so heavily skewed towards academics and academically-qualified professionals.

The second, which I encountered as a line from a film which was delivered wonderfully well by Walther Matthau, has been in my head for a long time. It was only while preparing this service however that I came to see a more profound side to it, which I will address later.

For now please just treat them as comic. Both fall into the grammatical category of parapsodokians - figures of speech in which the latter part of a sentence or phrase is surprising or unexpected.

So did you know that "to steal ideas from one person is plagiarism - to steal from many is research!"?

Can you see where Walter is coming from when he intones "a friend in need.....is a pest!"?

Further thoughts

I would also like to share with you now some words which I encountered recently, and which have helped lead me both to a less negative view of organised religion and to a better understanding of the relationship between spirituality, religious belief, and compassionate action. They are the words of Karen Armstrong, former nun, self-confessed "freelance monotheist", prodigious writer of informed and insightful books about religion and spirituality, and founder of the Charter for Compassion.

INTERVIEWER "A lot of people say that religion is the root of all conflict.....from all the research that you have done, is that the case?"

KAREN ARMSTRONG "No, it isn't, although I used to hold that attitude myself. In fact the major causes of war and conflict are greed, fear, cruelty, envy, hatred, and ambition. It's true however that religion, as well as secular ideologies, have often been used to give these rather self-serving and very destructive emotions a sort of legitimacy. That's unfortunate, but no, wars have been caused largely by state structures, by economic disparity, (and) by greed for other people's riches and wealth, which is still the case today.

(However), especially where a conflict becomes drawn-out such as has happened with the Arab-Israeli conflict, religion gets sucked in and becomes a part of the problem."

INTERVIEWER "Let me ask you with all that studying you have done, what do you feel is the one lesson you have learned?"

KAREN ARMSTRONG "There are two, if I may.

One is that belief - accepting certain doctrines - is not very important. Our word "belief" in English meant "commitment" originally - it was much more action-oriented. Many of these so-called doctrines that we have, say, in the Christian world, like "trinity" and "incarnation", began originally as a call to action rather than just the acceptance of a particular idea.

The second thing is that all the world religions insist that there's something wrong with your spirituality if it doesn't lead you to practical compassion, to a profound respect for other people, to seeing other people as sacred, inviolable and unique."

I invite you now to reconsider the one-liner about a friend in need. On face value, which is how I had always seen it, it was simply a smart and comic way to capture what is at least a part of reality for most of us, and would have had little place in this service.

However, Karen's words have helped me to see that one extreme reality - thinking primarily of a friend in need as a burden - is true only for those who are almost completely out of touch with their own spirituality, and who are living a life in which self-interest rules.

Fortunately most people, including many who do not think in religious or spiritual terms, are more in touch with their spirituality and with their compassion.

The lens through which I and many Unitarians view human spirituality supports the holding of personal faith, but does not demand that this must include belief in an interventionist creator God. This lens allows us to see that all who are sufficiently in touch with their spirituality are able to offer help to any friend in need with an easy selflessness, and in so doing demonstrate some of the practical compassion which our spirituality can enable.

I believe that with continuing effort anyone can grow more in touch with their spirituality, and that the way to happiness is to both work for such growth and simultaneously to do what our spirituality enables us to do with comfort.

Could it be that helping ourselves and others to grow more in touch with our spirituality is the best thing we can do, either as individuals or as a spiritual community?

Wouldn't it be great if everyone could do this without demeaning those who view human spirituality through a different lens?

Unitarian worship and Unitarian community - a personal vision

Let's now look at Unitarian worship and Unitarian community - in particular at what binds us together. It is of course a personal vision - you are free to agree or to disagree.

The primary requirements for being a Unitarian, as I understand them and as they attracted me to the movement in the first place, are the freedom to hold your own personal faith free of creed and dogma and the requirement to allow every individual the same freedom to follow their own spiritual path.

These are much more open than those of any other religion or spiritual movement that I know of currently, and are at the heart of what has become known as the liberal religious view. Such a view can be, and is, taken by individuals within all religions and spiritual movements, but is always subject to the creedal demands of their particular faith community.

Unitarianism may not be the only religious denomination which claims to be non-creedal, but it is the only one in the UK which is evolving into being truly creedless. It has already become wider than a liberal Christian denomination open only to those who are happy to describe themselves as Christian. Nominally still liberal Christian, it is now open to Christians **and** others. Its collection of autonomous religious and spiritual communities now include many such as ours which are in practice united through the freedom to find worth and meaning in all experience **rather** than through "being" Christian - or "being" anything else for that matter.

I am a Unitarian precisely because of this absence of any creedal demand to accept one particular view of the possible forces in, around, and beyond us as being the only one to hold truth, or even as being necessarily the best of a range of views which hold parts of the truth.

But this brings challenges. Is it then a separate religion? Is it even a religion at all, or is it best thought of as a spiritual movement? What binds us without creed? How do individual Unitarians relate to others, including fellow Unitarians, whose personal faiths are very different to their own? How, what, and why do we worship?

Unitarian Worship

Indeed, what is worship?

Help is to be found in the fact that the term "worship" is a shortened form of the word "worthship". I was advised recently by the Unitarian minister who introduced me to the term that it owes its "resurrection" to Don Cupitt (of Sea of Faith fame).

Unitarians generally worship in this broader sense, through the ongoing process of seeking out and valuing that which is of worth, often referring to this as finding meaning in life. We are free as individuals to find worth and meaning from within the entirety of human experience.

Worship is our primary communal spiritual practice. But how exactly should we engage in worship?

The answer is that we will all find different ways, both privately and collectively. I find that for me success in worship depends on both remaining open to my own spirituality and that of others and on bringing a learning attitude to my own experience.

What can we gain from this kind of worship? Let me tell you what I hope to achieve through worship.

For me, it's not about becoming perfect or all-knowing, nor about finding a "right for all time" set of rules to impose on others. It's not just about self-sacrifice and doing good, and it's certainly not about personal salvation in the sense of defeating death.

It is about trying to become the best human being I can be, identifying behaviours which help me towards this, finding the courage to apply these, accepting my failures and learning from them, accepting the failures of others and helping them rather than judging them, and it's about both finding and enabling happiness here on earth.

It is about ongoing spiritual growth, betterment which is powered by a learning attitude which is open to all new knowledge.

I think that we might do well to use the term "worship" in public to describe our primary spiritual practice.

Unitarian community

We, like all religious and spiritual communities, seek to help ourselves to become better human beings and seek to help our members through both spiritual support and positive action. Like virtually all religious and spiritual communities, and like many secular communities, we also try to reach out beyond our respective communities to help others through positive action.

Central to our autonomous Unitarian spiritual communities however is the special way in which we are bound together internally, which comes as a direct result of insisting that membership of our communities is not dependent upon acceptance of creed. This is radically different from, indeed almost unique amongst, spiritual and religious communities.

I believe that if this very special nature of Unitarian community was both more fully understood and made much more visible to others then we would be doing a lot of people a great service, and that doing this would be a very powerful form of positive action.

Let's start our further exploration into the special nature of Unitarian community by looking at two different attempts at defining what Unitarians and Unitarian communities are about.

The first comes from the main website of the National Unitarian Fellowship, a distance Fellowship which operates on-line, through bi-monthly Newsletters and Viewpoints, and through postal Books of Fellowship.

The second comes from the preamble of the recently-adopted new Constitution of the Glasgow Unitarian Church, and dates back at least to 1955 and probably as far back as 1856. If this is true, then it may seem extremely forward-thinking for its day. Unitarian thought about religion and its relationship to mankind has however always been extremely forward-thinking.

This was of course much more radical then than now, which could perhaps partly explain why so many more then than now were prepared to both attend and to put their money where their spirituality was.

from the website of the National Unitarian Fellowship –

“Unitarianism is a religious movement in which individuals are free to follow their reason - there is no pressure from creed or scripture. It grew out of Christianity and sees Jesus as a man to be followed not a god to be worshipped. It is open to change in the light of new thought and discoveries.

Unitarians aim to understand, accept and respect each other. We affirm the essential unity of humankind and its interdependence with all life on our planet. We seek a spiritual and moral framework of love, tolerance and justice for our lives.”

from the preamble to the Constitution of Glasgow Unitarian Church –

“The Glasgow Unitarian Church is a fellowship of men and women who seek together, upon the traditional Unitarian principles of freedom and tolerance, the truth of religion through worship, study and service. No creed is imposed in the fellowship of our society and individuals are encouraged and helped to find their own faith and discover their own beliefs about God and humankind.

It is thus the privilege and the responsibility of each generation of members to form their own concept of the nature and function of their church, in the light of its name and past tradition, the present needs of the community and their own aspirations and capabilities.”

These are a pretty good start to thinking about what Unitarian community is!

I offered a list of positive descriptions of Unitarian community in an earlier service entitled "good news", which revolved around the near-unique spiritual openness of our communities. I offer here one description.

“Unitarians engage in a broader spiritual search using both human spirituality and human reason as we pursue our personal spiritual paths and build our diverse personal faiths.

Our communities are united, not in shared personal faith, but in shared search of all

human experience and knowledge for personal enlightenment and spiritual growth.”

If we were only to let others know that this is what we offer, and that this is who we are - so much more than the "falling Christians" or "people of little faith" which the near-oxymoron terms "creedless Christianity" and "creedless religion" conjure up to many - would that not amount to significant positive action on behalf of others?