

**From Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church  
5 January 2014, led by Barry Bell**

**New Understandings**

Today I will be bringing to you, and inviting you to consider, some of the relatively new understandings of what it is to be human and living on this planet Earth.

At the very centre of Unitarianism has always been a willingness to open our minds – and our hearts and souls if you will – to new understandings which are less divisive and more compatible with human reason, human spirituality, and the entirety of human knowledge and experience than those supplied by traditional dogma-based religion, even though the Unitarian church started from entirely within Non-conformist Protestant Christianity.

Recent events on Boxing Day 2013 have for me shone a light on a key difference between the uniting approaches to “being human” taken by Unitarians, Unitarian Universalists, and others seeking such better ways and, despite their other many benefits, the inherently divisive ones provided by traditional dogma-led religions.

I am referring to the challenge presented to Tim Berners-Lee – and therefore to us, our fellow Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, and others - by the BBC whilst he was acting as guest editor of the radio 4 “Today” programme for Boxing Day this year.

A particular view OF THE BBC’s religious department lies at the heart of the BBC’s refusal to allow Tim’s choice of Unitarian Minister – Rev. Andy Pakula of New Unity Unitarian Church – to present the “thought for the day” slot in that programme, on the grounds that he identifies as atheist.

I believe that now is the appropriate time to openly challenge this widely-held view, which is that to be considered a person of faith or person of religion it is necessary to profess belief in the certain existence of an interventionist supernatural God.

The need to make such challenge seems to me to be entirely relevant in a service about new understandings, and I’ll return to it later.

I start however with a much-shortened extract from a recent service at Dover Unitarian Church taken by Rob Wheeler, an essentially humanist friend of mine. It contains some quite insightful and original views about what Jesus was doing and was all about and, perhaps more importantly, of what he was not doing and was not all about.

I bring it to you today because it is in fact pretty typical of the sort of things Unitarians have long been prepared to engage with while trying to improve our understandings of what it is to be human and of how best to respond to our sense of the divine.

“There have been three major attempts by scholars since the 18th century to get at the Truth of the historical Jesus. None of the quests to get behind the layers of tradition and mythology that appear to have built up around the character of Jesus have been really successful.....

Latest scholarship has been diffuse in its views, with Jesus seen variously as:

*an apocalyptic prophet;*

*a charismatic healer;*

*a wandering philosopher of the simple life;*

*the Jewish Messiah;*

*a prophet of social change who favoured the poor and outcasts.*

Albert Schweitzer had however concluded at the beginning of the 20th Century that the Jesus of traditional theology was a myth, a creation of Christians, designed to support and perpetuate a traditional culture, with Jesus an apocalyptic prophet who really believed that the end of the world and the last judgement would occur within the current generation.

I think what Jesus was getting at can be illuminated by considering three features of his teaching that are frequently overlooked.

### ***1. Jesus spoke in aphorisms***

Jesus was not any kind of systematic thinker and did not promulgate a theory of good action or a systematised code of conduct. He was a Rabbi in the Wisdom tradition, uttering pithy aphorisms and parables more in common with Aesop than Aristotle. That's not to say that Jesus did not have general moral principles. He was a first century Jew (not a Christian, please note), and derived his ethics from his Judaism. However, when his fellow Jews did not take up his ideas in a big way the apostles, and Paul in particular, altered their marketing strategy and tried selling their new faith – Christianity - to the Gentiles instead with, as it happens, spectacular success.

Severed from its Jewish roots, all that was left of Christian ethical teaching was a loose set of out-of-context sayings and stories – hardly enough on which to run a private life, let alone a civil state.....

Aphorisms do not embody general principles. They are literary "snapshots" depicting in a vivid manner typical human scenarios and plausible responses. We make a mistake if we treat them as general codes of conduct rather than invitations to view situations in a particular way.....

### ***2. Jesus used paradox and hyperbole***

Jesus frequently used figures of speech such as deliberate paradox and hyperbole. For instance, he talked of camels going through eyes of needles, beams of wood in neighbours' eyes and forgiving your brother seventy-time-seven.

This style of hyperbole was, and still is, common in Middle Eastern writing. However, orthodox Christians often resist such an interpretation as it seems to be diluting the 'radical' demand of Jesus.

### ***3. Jesus used antithesis***

When Jesus uttered an aphorism it was frequently declared as an antithesis to conventional interpretations of the current Jewish tradition. He often uses the form: "In the past you were told... but I tell you...".

So, is Jesus simply saying in a very general way "be radically generous"?

Yes – I think that's what it amounts to.

I think that Christian ethics is essentially an ethics of attitude not one of general principles or rules. This is useful and important and, indeed, a profound insight, but it is not enough to support an ethical life.

You need a lot more in the way of principles and policies and so I think it is dangerous to think that by opening the Bible you can read off a complete philosophy of life. What we find in holy writ is inspiration, not prescription.”

I was fascinated by the insightful interpretation Rob has put upon the manner in which Jesus of Nazareth appears to have communicated as being **indicative** of what he was all about.

I would now like to bring some examples of how modern Unitarian communities are representing themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

I start with how the New Unity Unitarian church in Islington (Andy Pakula's church) chose to present their forthcoming family Christmas service -

SUNDAY DECEMBER 22nd 3.30PM

NEWINGTON GREEN UNITARIAN  
CHAPEL

For families who want Christmas to be  
more than presents,  
but aren't so sure that a saviour was born.



Come celebrate the human story in our  
radically inclusive community of faith.  
Expect songs & carols, readings,  
a kid-friendly message of hope from our  
atheist minister & plenty of festive fun,  
followed by mulled wine for grown ups and  
mince pies for all.

Next, I present how Rev Maud Robinson, Minister to Unitarians in Edinburgh at St Marks Church, chose to describe modern Unitarian congregations last year within her presentation of "Time for Reflection" - the weekly equivalent of "Thought for the Day" for the Scottish Parliament –

"Our congregations nowadays comprise of people who identify as Christian, Buddhist, humanist, agnostic, and many others".

And now, how Unitarians in Edinburgh present themselves in the wonderfully concise signage outside St Marks Church –

Unitarians in Edinburgh

We support the pursuit of individual spirituality within a community of diverse beliefs

Now the statement about our own community – as expressed within my services – of the “shared faith” which I believe that Unitarian communities of all shades are already based upon –

“We here are an Inclusive Spirituality community - a religious and spiritual community central to which is shared faith in the power of enabling personal spiritual growth free from the divisiveness of shared dogmatic belief in the absolute truth of only one way of viewing the wonderful mystery which is the cosmos and life within it, and in which we are both free to respond positively to our spirituality in our own way and respecting of others’ right to do the same.”

And finally, a suggested restatement of the relationship between Unitarians and religious freedom (from my part of a joint service about this subject) –

“We support both the right of all to hold personal faith as a basic human right and the responsibility of all to restrict their actions in accordance with such faith to those which fully respect the human rights of others”

I now bring you some new understandings from outside of the Unitarian community, shortened today to allow space to consider later the need to challenge traditional attitudes to the nature of spirituality, faith, and religion and to what it is to “be human”.

The first is from Rev. Michael Dowd’s book “Thank God for Evolution”.

"God is not a person; God is a mythic personification of reality. If we miss this we miss everything.

Birth, life, death, the cycles and rhythms of Nature, the elemental forces of the Universe—these are undeniably real.

Like it or not, we humans have always been in an inescapable relationship with a Reality that we could neither fully predict nor control. And given the nature of our brains, there's one thing that people in every culture and throughout history have instinctually done: we've used metaphors, stories and analogies to understand and relate to that which is unavoidably, undeniably real and mysterious.

We can't “not” do this. Consciously or unconsciously, we will always interpret via metaphors."

The next comes from “A Beginner’s Guide to Exploring Spirituality” by Joshua Becker.

“Spirituality can be a very touchy topic, but there is nothing more central to our lives than our understanding of spirituality. Whether or not we have intentionally pursued a personal spirituality, our beliefs have a profound impact on our lives. Consider how they impact our understanding of ourselves, of others, of the world around us, of morality, of evil, of money, and of afterlife.

For that reason, one of the most significant journeys we can ever embark upon is the exploration of it.

You will never regret any time spent furthering your understanding of the Universe.”

And finally I bring you something from an article in the Huffington Post dated December 15 2013 about a new book entitled “The Coming Interspiritual Age”.

“Since the beginnings of formal religions, prophets and mystics have been predicting the spiritual transformation of mankind, a transformation that will usher in an age of peace and harmony.

More than 100 years ago Indian guru Vivekananda, who brought eastern spiritual philosophy to the West, proclaimed [the unity of world religions](#). He envisioned humanity coming together bonded by oneness rather than differences.

Another spiritual leader, Sathya Sai Baba -- an avatar according to his followers -- predicted in the 1980s that a vast spiritual revolution would sweep over the planet in the coming decades.

**Every spiritual group in which I have participated over the last 30 years has expressed a similar sentiment: that we are in the midst of a planetary shift in consciousness.**

Yet the horrific events that we read about and view in vivid television reports hardly testify to an imminent state of spiritual elevation. Conflict, greed, self-interest, divisiveness, warfare and even genocide are as prevalent on the world stage today as they have ever been. Even religions and sects of religions that worship the same God are torn by strife and violence.

So when I first heard about the [new book by Kurt Johnson and David Robert Ord](#), "The Coming Interspiritual Age," I was understandably skeptical. But when I read the endorsements by notables like Ken Wilbur, Andrew Harvey and Matthew Fox, I thought, "Maybe Johnson and Ord are on to something." And indeed they are.

After setting down basic principles, "The Coming Interspiritual Age" takes the reader on a panoramic journey through human history, showing that discoveries and innovations have always co-existed with destructive forces. They point out that our progress from the cave to space travel over a relatively short time is no small accomplishment but that despite this stunning achievement, humans have been sloshing through a quagmire of base emotions and I-me driven motives.

That will change, they argue, because conditions today are setting the stage for radical progress in the spiritual domain.

Indeed, we are on the threshold of a new interspiritual age, say Johnson and Ord. Contributing to the likelihood of this new age is that fact that science is loosening its long-standing commitment to rigid materialism and reductionism in favor of "an all-inclusive quantum reality in which everything is made of the same thing."

**Diversity, they explain, is a fundamental principle of nature. The task for humans is to find the unity within diversity. Only by doing this will we ultimately promote human survival."**

I hope that you have enjoyed hearing these new understandings, and that you may agree with me that much which has always been at the heart of Unitarian thinking is already in tune with them – perhaps more so than it was ever in tune with the ways in which traditional religion imprisons personal spirituality.

We Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have long allowed each other to be true to our personal worldviews and beliefs whilst seeking spiritual growth free from the artificial divisions of fundamentalist dogma.

I believe that now is the appropriate time for we Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists to challenge existing attitudes to faith, spirituality, and religion and to identify more clearly with the new understandings outlined above.

These new understandings seem to me to be based upon the realisation that unity of good purpose and personal spiritual growth on a global scale is much more likely to be attained through community of diverse and non-dogmatic personal faith rather than through the divisive dogmatism which has characterised religious community based on shared faith in only one worldview of what it is to be human.

I think that we need to take a stand against existing attitudes which would see terms such as atheist spirituality, atheist religion, and atheist Ministry as oxymorons.

I think that it is time to stop hiding the unity through diversity we have always sought behind a facade of traditional dogma-led religion, and to align ourselves more with the coming interspiritual age.

I think that it is time to more clearly identify as “spiritual and religious communities open to all who seek spiritual growth” – which will of course include those whose personal faith includes significant elements of Christian doctrine (and who may identify as Christian) and those whose personal faith does not include a supernatural interventionist God (and who may identify as atheist) – rather than to identify as “Christian but open to others”, a position which the vast majority of people find very difficult either to understand or to engage with.

*Barry Bell*