

**from the Worthship service held at Glasgow Unitarian Church  
on 8 September 2013 and led by Barry Bell**

**What comprises “valid” spiritual or religious practice?**

In today’s service I will be trying to address what exactly constitutes “valid” spiritual or religious practice. My starting point is that the **purpose** of such practice must always be the enabling of spiritual growth – becoming more caring, less selfish human beings through getting ever more in touch with our innate human spirituality.

As always, you are entirely free to agree or disagree with anything that is said in this service, which I bring to you in the Unitarian tradition of worthship – the finding, valuing and sharing of that which may be found to be of worth and meaning from within the entirety of human experience.

It is quite simply my hope that you may be able to take away and value – maybe even share with others - something you find in this service to be of worth and meaning to **you**.

**What exactly is spiritual or religious practice?**

Before trying to tackle what we and others may feel must be part of religious or spiritual practice for it to be “valid”, we need to consider what we each think “religious or spiritual practice” to be.

I personally think of it as everything a human being may choose to do in response to their human spirituality – the “good” part of humanity which is in all of us – both in trying to be and in trying to become a better, more caring human being, and in trying to limit the damage they and others can cause by the following of their dark side - the “bad” part of humanity which is also in all of us.

This is a more open definition than most, and is based upon my starting point in thinking about what it is to “be human”, a starting-point compatible with being a Unitarian but not really compatible with traditional Christianity.

This starting-point is that human spirituality as a part of our humanity is the simple reality, and that religion is simply one of many valid responses to this part of being human.

This places salvation in our own hands, through getting better in touch with our spirituality regardless of how we each may understand its source and through both enabling and achieving spiritual growth. This is a very viable and uniting alternative to salvation through the divisive holding of blind faith in the existence of, and actions of, a supernatural power as defined in only one particular religious worldview.

This definition also allows the inclusion of a wider range of activity as legitimate spiritual practice, including activity which those involved may not think of as spiritual or religious practice.

Many people however regard as “invalid” all practices which do not involve a significant level of formality and scheduling or which do not include a significant level of buy-in to the creed and dogma of a religious or spiritual belief system.

### **Fundamentalist faith - shared faith in the truth of only one worldview**

Let's now take a closer look at what is asked by those religions which traditionally demand the holding of faith exclusively in one, and only one, religion – theirs – as part of valid spiritual practice.

This is the somewhat divisive demand of the many fundamentalist religions whose unity only truly connects those who buy fully into the creed and dogma of their particular religion's teachings. The biggest of these is still mainstream Christianity (though with Islam coming up on the rails).

The worldviews of such fundamentalist religions are always claimed to be the only “true” worldview, and are always founded upon the claimed “authority” of exclusive revealed truth **from** a certainly-existent omnipotent interventionist supernatural power which created and runs the cosmos. The individuals **through** whom these revelations are communicated are sometimes claimed to be more than human.

Their exclusive, and excluding, worldview will always include a unique and quite detailed view of this supernatural power and of “his” or “her” purpose for humankind, they will always feel able to tell you “What God Wants”, and they will always insist that the holding of blind faith in their creed and dogma is essential for your well-being and salvation.

Their worldview covers –

- the nature of human beings, other life-forms, the earth, and the cosmos
- the nature of both natural and supernatural forces and/or powers held to be surrounding us
- the nature of our connection to each other, to other life forms, to the earth, to the cosmos, and to these natural and supernatural forces and/or powers – which will include a view of how we came to be here, why we are here, and what happens to us after we die
- how we should try to live our lives
- how we should treat other human beings, other life-forms, the earth, and the cosmos

What you may find a little more surprising is my claim that those fundamentalist **rationalist** viewpoints which effectively claim to contain the only “true” worldview of these very same things make similarly divisive demands.

They do not of course claim the “authority” of a supernatural power, but do claim that intellect and reason are sufficient “authority” to deny, dismiss, or ridicule all other ways but theirs of responding to those parts of “being human” which lie beyond rationality, those parts described variously as humanity, spirituality, religiosity, and soul.

This itself is however a position of shared faith when viewed from within a worldview in which human spirituality is seen as simple reality and as much an innate part of “being human” as emotion, intellect, and reason.

For me this view of spirituality, as contained in a Unitarian-friendly and non-fundamentalist worldview, neatly relegates our necessary conjectures about whether, how and why spirituality exists into the same place as our conjectures about forces and powers in the cosmos. Both are things we are obliged to consider in our personal worldview because of our spirituality, but both are also less important, as well as profoundly more divisive than, simply engaging more fully with this spirituality.

### **More open religions and spiritual communities**

Let's now look at the many, more open religions and spiritual communities, covering all sorts of shades from slightly liberal Christian, through the likes of Hinduism and Sufism, to religious naturalism, spiritual agnostic/spiritual humanist/atheist spirituality, and inclusive spirituality.

All have different worldviews, most have creeds and doctrines, but each includes - to a greater or lesser extent – acceptance that other religions and spiritual communities are valid spiritual paths, provide valuable insights, and can be learned from.

### **Unitarian communities**

Unitarian communities worldwide lie at the more progressive, least fundamentalist end of this spectrum. Being autonomous they vary substantially, but all offer a very relevant and much needed bridge, well-suited to 21<sup>st</sup> Century awareness and knowledge, between liberal religious response and humanist response as we search for the truth about what it is to “be human”.

The Unitarian worldview is, and always has been, focussed on what we do in **this** world, and on enabling spiritual growth without mandatory buy-in to only one view of what we are connected to or governed by. We are proud to say “make up your own mind” about such matters.

## Regular scheduled spiritual or religious practices

Let's look now at the sort of things **outside** of "shared faith" which may be insisted upon as part of regular spiritual or religious practice. These can be both personal and communal, and many believe that they must be "scheduled" to be part of "valid" practice.

These include various rituals, observation, reflection, contemplation, self- debasement and personal hardship of various forms, withdrawal, meditation (possibly transcendental), prayer, study of religious or other manuscripts, and service. Service can be to a higher power or God, to the earth, or to each other, and can include surrender, love, compassion, and kindness.

Each of these sub-areas may be insisted upon by some as a "must do" in order for a practice to be "valid".

They may even insist that some of these things are important enough to be "must **always** do". The downside here is that this can lead to an enforcement of practice which both restricts, and causes damage to, others, particularly when taken to the point where repeated failures are seen as sufficient cause for a person to be "justifiably" shunned.

I identify **Love** and **Service** as the most important of these distinct possible requirements which many will hold to be "must do" inclusions in any "valid" practice. These are certainly things I would expect anyone who is in touch with their spirituality to be doing, and to be viewing as part of their spiritual practice. They will however be "doing" them both progressively more often and progressively better as the inevitable **outcome** of spiritual growth achieved through effective ongoing spiritual practice.

You may recall me bringing you something from an interview given by Karen Armstrong some time ago. Karen is a respected academic and former nun who has spent her entire adult life looking at religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and is both the author of "Twelve steps to a Compassionate Life" and the founder of the Charter for Compassion.

I agree with her that an apparent absence of compassion on the part of someone is a powerful indicator that there is something wrong with that person's spiritual practice, although I would add the possibility that their spiritual practice may currently be sound and they are simply still a very long way away indeed from having become **fully** in touch with their spirituality.

## **So what should we consider to be “valid” spiritual or religious practice**

You will recall that I started out by saying that for me the **purpose** of spiritual or religious practice must always be the enabling of spiritual growth – becoming more caring, less selfish human beings through becoming closer to our innate human spirituality.

Please note that important word “more”. Spiritual practice is about **ongoing** self-improvement. It is neither about being perfect nor about judging those who are imperfect. I am entirely happy to agree with Bill Darlison, Cathal Courtney, Maud Robinson, and many, many others that we are ALL broken and imperfect, all with a dark side, and will always remain so.

Spiritual practice is about finding ways to become less imperfect, ever more in touch with our spirituality, ever more in touch with that which is good about being a human being, ever more in touch with what is termed by many our humanity.

I would remind you of the “shared faith” which I believe that Unitarian communities of all shades are already based upon, reflecting one of the most uniting and least divisive worldviews possible and which I believe will become ever more accepted as we move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

“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.”

**I would suggest to you that our community can and must validate, encourage, and enable all personal spiritual or religious practice which meets a very pragmatic test.**

**This test – as suggested by Karen Armstrong and others – is simply that your personal spiritual path and practice should lead you to practical compassion, to a profound respect for other people, and to seeing other people as sacred, inviolable and unique.**

*Barry Bell*