

## **Shared faith and diversity – a reconciliation**

**from the Worship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church  
22 June 2014 led by Barry Bell**

This service concerns religious and spiritual freedom, diversity of personal and shared faith, and reconciliation of the shared and the diverse.

### **Religious freedom**

My thoughts on religious freedom were brought into focus recently by something which happened in the Sudan. A Khartoum Shariah court in Sudan not only sentenced an eight-month-pregnant Doctor to death for the “crime” of apostasy but also sentenced her to 100 lashes for adultery because it did not recognise the validity of her marriage to a Christian.

In making this ruling – in a case brought by her own brother - they completely rejected the relevance of the fact that she had been brought up in the Christian faith by her mother and believed herself to be Christian, and instead imposed their view that the fact that her father was a Muslim defined **her** as a Muslim, leading to the consequent interpretation of her refusal to give up her Christian faith as a refusal to return to the Islamic faith.

This view of religious freedom stands in very sharp contrast to Unitarian valuing of religious freedom, which I paraphrased in an earlier joint service here with Alastair as -

**“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 for one feel that we must take a stand against a return to the dark ages and to some of the worst aspects of traditional religion – we should not stand by and allow a Sudanese Inquisition to emulate the Spanish Inquisition of centuries before.

I see this very clearly to be a major human rights issue.

I move now to something completely different.

This week I had the pleasure of attending a “thanksgiving” service for the life of Harry Wylie at Cairns church, Milngavie – a Church of Scotland church which supports the Progressive Christian Network, and which Harry’s daughter (Anne) and her husband (Tom Gilchrist) both attend, although Anne remains a member of Glasgow Unitarian Church. Harry was of course, at 103, the longest-standing member of Glasgow Unitarian Church until his recent death.

More about Cairns church later, but for now I would like to bring you the prayer which Harry had prepared expressly for use in that thanksgiving service which he himself had had a large hand in preparing (see appendix 1 – Harry Wylie’s prayer).

I find in this prayer some wonderful understandings of humanity, human spirituality, life, death, loss, and eternity.

I was very impressed that Rev. Andrew Frater, the Minister of Cairns Church and the one who had read Harry’s prayer for us, felt obliged at the time – as I do now – to repeat these wonderful words from the ending of the prayer –

“dedication to those underlying and eternal realities which alone give our lives meaning and worth”.

## Shared faith and diversity – a reconciliation

Their diversity is perhaps the best thing to be said of our thoughts, beliefs, and personal faiths when considering the cosmos and life within it, considering what it is to be human being, and considering our possible purpose.

When we consider these essentially spiritual questions, we form both beliefs (that part of our personal world-view resulting from reflection upon human experience and teachings which are strongly evidence-based rather than interpretive and/or intuitive) **and** personal faiths (that more spiritual part of our personal world-view resulting from reflection upon human experience and teachings with little evidential base and which are largely interpretive and/or intuitive/mystic).

A few brave souls trust only their own experiences and/or reasoning, but most of us enjoy the solace and support of belonging to a “shared faith” community of some kind.

Please note that I regard those who declare “there is no supernatural interventionist God, and no life after death; religion is all mumbo-jumbo and smoke and mirrors, and I want nothing to do with it!” as holding a personal faith and as belonging to the wide “shared faith” community who have abandoned traditional God-based religion.

I believe that – however beneficial in other ways they may be - it is the nature of any “shared faith” community to be at best a little divisive, and – much worse – it is their nature to belittle or even damage not only human beings **outside** of that community but also those inside who are deemed to have fallen short of that community’s ideals.

It is this quandary which I am trying to get a handle on today.

Here now are some relevant readings.

We start with a little negativity – from the BBC’s religious department – as referred to in a service earlier this year by myself.

“A particular view of the BBC’s religious department lies at the heart of the BBC’s refusal to allow Tim (Tim Berners-Lee, the Unitarian Universalist who donated the World-Wide-Web to humankind) his choice of Unitarian Minister – the Rev. Andy Pakula of New Unity Unitarian Church – to present the “thought for the day” slot in the Sunday morning programme they had invited Tim to present, on the grounds that he identifies as atheist.”

Next, a wonderful thing which is central to the spiritual and religious approach of Cairns Church Scotland, Milngavie, and is found on their website and on bookmarks they distribute freely – see Appendix 2 (Cairns Church of Scotland).

Next, two short pieces from the Edinburgh Unitarian and Universalist Church about Unitarians and Unitarianism –

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

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

Next, I bring you something from GUC member and Minister-in-training Ralph Catts. It is a piece published in a G.A.Zette (the daily report to those attending the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches’ Annual Meetings) in 2014.

You perhaps need to know that the G.A.Zette is always run by “young” Unitarians, that the original article Ralph refers to was written by such a “staff” member, and that the article - entitled “Is David Usher a Unitarian?” and which centred on the challenge of communicating with young people about Unitarianism - included an argument against what the author claimed to be David Usher’s “staunch view” that those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious” are wrong and are not proper Unitarians.

See appendix 3 – Pews and Pulpits

The penultimate reading is from a newspaper report in the Huffington Post on the book “The Coming Inter-Spiritual Age”

See appendix 4 – the coming inter-spiritual age

The last piece I bring you is my attempt to identify the “shared” part of Unitarian faith.

“We here are an Inclusive Spirituality community - a religious and spiritual community central to which is **shared faith** in the wisdom 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, doing so in a way 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.”

But where has all this got us?

Well, it has certainly reinforced my belief that the openness at the heart of modern Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism is sorely needed, and must be made much more widely available.

More importantly, it has led me to the importance of the words used some time ago by Iain Brown here in a private conversation with me – “it’s really all about the way we **hold** our faith”.

I believe that the key to reconciling shared faith with diversity really **is** the way in which we hold our personal faith.

We should understand that all human beings have little choice but to be driven by whatever their own personal faith might be. In this sense, faith can indeed move mountains!

We Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists should also understand that it is **only** by holding our personal faiths non-dogmatically – knowing that we have belief in one view of that which cannot be truly known rather than believing we know that which cannot be truly known – that we will be able to truly respect the human rights of others and to demonstrate this path to the unity through diversity which we so desperately need.

Andre Compte-Sponville (the author of “the Book of Atheist Spirituality”) said much the same thing -

“(In these matters) people should know that they believe rather than believe that they know”

The very title of Rev. Paul Razor’s book about Unitarian Universalism also says much the same – the title is “Faith without Certainty”.

This is far from being a position of very weak faith (as others may initially dismiss it).

**The practice of holding faith – and allowing it to drive us – but without false certainty may ultimately be the only way to safely unite humankind.**

*Barry Bell*

## **Appendix 1 – Harry Wylie’s prayer**

### **Harry Wylie’s prayer**

We lift our hearts in search of inward resources we need to face life's varied experiences of joy and sorrow.

At a time when one to whom we have joined by ties of kinship and love hath been taken by death, we seek peace of acceptance.

We give thanks for the enrichment which has been ours through our shared experiences of friendship and understanding, our commitment to common causes and endeavours with Harry Wylie.

May the words and feelings and remembrances we share in these quiet moments strengthen us in our sympathy and support for one another and renew our dedication to those underlying and eternal realities which alone give our lives meaning and worth.

Amen

## **Appendix 2 – Cairns Church of Scotland, Milngavie**

“We in Cairns recognise an important distinction between religious needs and spiritual needs.

We believe that everyone has spiritual needs - searchings, longings, questions about what it is to be human and what life is about - but that not everyone seeks to answer these in a religious way, or by belonging to a church.

However they are expressed, we consider these deep spiritual needs to be valid and important in their own right, and we believe it is our role as a community-committed church, to help people to voice their questions about life and its meaning and to seek answers to them whether these answers take a 'religious' form or not

If their search leads people into the congregation, they will find a welcome, but our concern for them and our openness to them is unconditional.”

### **Appendix 3 – Pews and Pulpits**

“In a commentary on David Usher’s sermon (G.A.Zette issue 2 2014) the author wrote “this shows once again how those in the pulpit understand so little about those in the pews”.

The essence of the article is the challenge of communicating with young people about Unitarianism and argues that one can be spiritual without being religious.

The key point however about spiritual practice is the word “practice”, and where we gather together in worship we have an opportunity to explore our personal view of faith and test our assumptions among peers with whom we share a commitment to personal authenticity. Sharing worship is a religious practice which should aim to strengthen and renew our spiritual being.

The person in the pulpit in a Unitarian church does not have a set of external tenets on which to rely, and knows full well that in the pews are agnostics, deists, Muslims, “Christians” (although Trinitarians may deny them that title), as well as followers of the Dharma, the Tao, and others seeking refuge from the dictates of creeds. For many of these people the word “religion” will have salience, even though for some the word has negative connotations.

It is important for many that in services we address the notion of religious practice as a pathway to spiritual growth. While from the pew the address is taken as relating to the listener’s personal perspective, from the pulpit the address aims to reach people of many diverse views.

I am therefore tempted to respond to the comment quoted above with the following - “this shows once again how some in the pews understand so little about those in the pulpit”.

## **Appendix 4 – the coming inter-spiritual age**

From an article about “The Coming Inter-Spiritual Age”. A [new book by Kurt Johnson and David Robert Ord](#)

They say “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 inter-spiritual 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 favour 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.”**