

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

SERVICE ON SUNDAY 24th October 2010

Your God is Too Small By Iain Brown

Occasionally, in a serious conversation with a person who describes themselves as an atheist or an agnostic, I have asked them to describe the god they do not believe in. After listening to them, I have said to them, "But I don't believe in that god either! Your god is too small!" When I was asked recently to write a few words for our UK journal, The Inquirer, on Professor Stephen Hawking and his latest pronouncement that there was no need for the presence of God at the beginning of the Universe, at 'the big bang', I was surprised to find that I wrote them in much less than five minutes. I found myself writing "If I could form any concept of any God, that very formation would limit him, her or it, and I would almost certainly cease to believe in such a God that had suddenly become too small. Rather, as I sense or imagine my God, it is the God you and I cannot escape because we are part of it and it is part of us." That set me thinking, and as I led worship a Sunday or two later, I began with a hymn which assumes a particular view of God:

**Spirit Divine Attend Our Prayer,
And make our hearts thy Home;
Descend with all thy gracious power:
Come Holy Spirit, Come!**

**Come as the light: to waiting minds,
That long the Truth to know,
Reveal the narrow path of right,
The way of duty show.**

**Come as the dew: on hearts that pine
Descend in this still hour,
Till every barren place shall own
With joy thy quickening power.**

**Come as the wind: sweep clean away
What dead within us lies,
And search and freshen all our souls
With living energies.**

Then I led our communal contemplation as follows:

Let us begin here with ourselves. Let us listen to the constant chatter of our waking minds. If that chatter is full of anxiety or grief which is shouting at us, let us promise that chatter the hope of better days, tell it to stop for a moment and concentrate on here and now. Let us feel this community around us. Let us feel the strength, wisdom and calm of so many of the people collected here today.

SILENCE

Then let us move with our thoughts to the contemplation of the mysteries beyond all depression, all grief and all anxiety, beyond any urgent shouting that our mind may be doing to us today.

First let us consider these solid walls, the floor beneath us and our awareness of the physicality of our own bodies. Let us marvel at what the physicists tell us, that there is more space between the particles of the atoms our physical world is made up of than there is solid substance. What seems solid is actually mostly space.

Now let us travel on an imaginary journey of wonder into what we think of as deep space. Recently the astronomers watched the explosion of a star and found the oldest galaxy so far known.

Let us remember the words of that hymn we sometimes sing:

A fire-mist and a planet
A crystal and a cell
A star-flash and a saurian
And caves where cave folk dwell
The sense of law and beauty
A face turned from the clod-
Some call it evolution
And others call it God

Then let us return to the space which is ourselves, alone and yet together, and let us rise beyond the tangle of human relations and feelings and look within and beyond once again and marvel and marvel and marvel.

SILENCE

Then we sang that grand old classic Scottish Presbyterian hymn

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

**Unresting, unhasting and silent as light,
Nor wanting nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above,
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.**

**To all life thou givest - to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish; but nought changeth thee.**

**Great Spirit of glory, pure source of all light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All laud we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.**

Then came a selection of readings from our hymn books illustrating the broad variety of ideas of God that are current in just our own Unitarian tradition. We had already listened to three of them, one in the contemplation which began 'A firemist and a planet" and ended "Others call it God" and another in the hymn "Spirit Divine Attend Our Prayer" which really more closely corresponds to traditional Christian conceptions of the Holy Spirit or perhaps better to the concept of God as spirit. The third was, of course, the mystic grandeur of "Immortal, Invisible, God only wise"

I wanted to draw our attention to some of the wide varieties of views of God in our Unitarian tradition by doing a fast and selective survey of some of the hymns in our hymn books. It would have been excellent if we could have sung them all but the service of worship would have gone on well into the afternoon if we had tried. So I and several readers read parts of them so that they could be seen all at once together, in perspective side by side.

First, continuing In the tradition of the imperial grandeur of God the father, although not quite Blake's picture of the Ancient of Days:

**God of ages and of nations!
Every race and every time
Hath received thine inspirations,
Glimpses of thy truth sublime.
Ever spirits, in rapt vision,
Passed the heavenly veil within;
Ever hearts, bowed in contrition,
Found salvation from their sin.**

**Reason's noble aspiration
Truth in glowing clearness saw;
Conscience spoke its condemnation,
Or proclaimed the eternal law.**

**While thine inward revelations
Told the saints their prayers were heard,
Prophets to the guilty nations
Spoke thine everlasting word.**

Then perhaps not all that different, but still in the imperial vein:

**Be thou my vision, O God of my heart,
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art,
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking of sleeping, my presence my light.**

**Sovereign of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun.
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.**

Then, is this a feminist example? If it is, it is a beautiful one:

**Lady of the Season's laughter
In the summer's warmth be near;
When the winter follows after,
Teach our spirits not to fear.
Hold us in your steady mercy,
Lady of the turning year.**

**Goddess of all time's progression,
Stand with us when we engage
Hands and hearts to end oppression,
Writing history's fairer page.
Hold us in your steady mercy,
Lady of the turning age.**

Then, approaching mysticism:

**Mysterious Presence, Source of all,
The world without, the world within,
Fountain of life, O hear our call,
And pour thy living waters in.**

**Thou breakest in the rushing wind,
Thy spirit stirs in leaf and flower;
Nor wilt thou from the willing mind
Withhold thy light and love and power.**

**Thy hand unseen to accents clear
Awoke the psalmist's trembling lyre,
And touched the lips of holy seer
With flame from thine own altar-fire.**

**That touch divine still, God, impart,
Still give the prophet's burning word;**

**And vocal in each waiting heart
Let living psalms of praise be heard.**

And, one of my favourites:

**Divinity is round us - never gone
From earth or star,
From life or death, from good or even wrong -
In all we are.**

**Seek not for God in only noblest deeds -
Those seldom done;
For God's life throbs in all our anguished needs
Beneath the sun.**

**We yearn for God in a perfected one
By signs foretold –
While in mistakes and virtues just begun
God's ways unfold.**

**Wait not at last in truth and love made whole
Your God to see;
In every timid, false, or angered soul
There's love to free.**

**Then wake, O Soul, respect yourself today;
Create your part;
And look to find your life and truth and way
With honest art.**

Then there are joyous views of God, quite beyond all the hymns which celebrate the joy of living and the wonders of nature:

**We Sing the Joy of Living
We sing the joy of living,
We sing the mystery,
Of knowledge, lore and science,
Of truth that is to be;
Of searching, doubting, testing,
Of deeper insights gained,
Of freedom claimed and honoured,
Of minds that are unchained.**

**We sing the joy of living,
We sing of ecstasy,
Of warmth, of love, of passion,
Of flights of fantasy.
We sing of joy of living,
The dear, the known, the strange,
The moving, pulsing, throbbing
A universe of change.**

And:

Brief our days, but long for singing,
When to song is made our call
For a million stars now flinging
Light upon this earthly ball.
In a setting of what splendour
Are we given chance to render
Tribute for the whirling sky
Where we live and where we die.

Plant earth for us a dwelling,
Cool in wind and warm in light,
In its praise our song is swelling,
Grateful for this day and night,
We, the citizens of heaven,
Riding earth as it is driven
Down the spangled course of space,
Know the glory of this place.

And:

You are the song of my heart in the morning;
you are the dawn of truth in my soul; you are the dew of the rose's
adorning;
you are the woven whole.
Yours is the grace to be steadfast in danger;
yours is the peace that none can destroy; yours is the face of the need-
riven stranger;
yours are the wings of joy.
You are the deep to the deep in me calling;
you are a lamp where my feet shall tread; your way is steep, past the peril
of falling;
you are my daily bread.

Yours be the praise of my spirit uplifted;
you are the sea to each flowing stream; yours are the days that are
gathered and sifted;
you are the deathless dream.

And even:

Celebrate the gift of Laughter
Celebrate the gift of fun!
Celebrate till every rafter
Echoes songs so gaily sung
Put away all gloom and sadness
Let there be no lingering trace
Celebrate life's joy and gladness
With a smile on every face

Glory to the Cosmic Comic,
Source of laughter, source of fun,
Who delights in heavenly frolic

**With the planets, stars and sun.
In the joyous re-creation
Coming with each new-born day,
Let us live in quiet elation --
Come what may — yes, come what may.**

Then, moving nearer to my kind of theology:

**We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude partial and confined.
No, let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from his word.**

**Who dares to bind to partial sense
The oracles of heaven,
For the nations, tongues and climes,
And all the ages given.
That universe, how much unknown!
That ocean unexplored!
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from his word.**

And in the new Unitarian hymn book, an exposition in poetry and music of almost the very place I started from:

**Beautifully moving, ceaselessly forming,
Growing, emerging with awesome delight,
Maker of Rainbows, glowing with colour,
Arching in wonder, energy flowing
In darkness and in light.**

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

**Spinner of Chaos, pulling and twisting,
Freeing the fibres of pattern and form,
Weaver of Stories, famed or
Unspoken, tangled or broken,
Shaping a tapestry vivid and warm.**

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

**Nudging Discomforter, prodding and shaking,
Waking our lives to creative unease,
Straight-Talking Lover, checking and
Humbling, jargon and grumbling, speaking
The truth that refreshes and frees:**

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Midwife of Changes, skilfully guiding,

**Drawing us out through the shock of the new,
Woman of Wisdom, deeply perceiving,
Never deceiving, freeing and leading in all that we do.
*Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria***

**Daredevil Gambler, risking and loving,
Giving us freedom to shatter your dreams,
Life-giving Loser, wounded and weeping,
Dancing and leaping,
Sharing the caring that heals and redeems.
*Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria***

What a galaxy of beautiful poetry and music!! – and all that is just within our own Unitarian tradition

The accusation which I levelled at Hawking and at any definition of God I could conceive of, that “Your God is too Small” put me a few days later in mind of a book of that title which I greatly enjoyed back in the late nineteen fifties, no less. It was by J. B. Phillips. He depicted various forms or concepts of God which he found stunting, even crippling. But before we turn to that, it seems important to avoid unnecessary superiority about other people’s attempts to convey something of their Gods in words.

Some time ago I preached on the necessity of the suspension of disbelief if communal shared worship is to be possible. I told how I learned in classes on English Literature about how the suspension of disbelief was a requirement of appreciation of the theatre. I saw for myself that the same suspension was required of several works of fiction. Even the use of the word ‘God’ usually gives me problems, especially when it seems to refer to the traditional Judeo-Christian patriarchal, judgemental version that I do not believe in. Sometimes when I hear God described as ‘love’ in the same service of worship as sends petitions to him, her or it to please stop the cholera epidemic in Haiti or when God is described as ‘Good’ I shudder and think “Well, they can put up a statue or an idol to God as Love if they want but that God is much too small to encompass my experience of him, her or it. So have I become just too sensitive, too picky, too obsessional?

Yes, in a sense, if I refuse to suspend disbelief, even for a moment, I am creating for myself an impossible position. If you are not allowed to describe your God at all for fear of being told he, she or it is too small, then any companionship in the spiritual life obviously becomes impossible.

I believe religion is an art form and that to enter into all art we must leave literalism behind. All art requires a flight of the imagination and religious services of worship are, as I have argued elsewhere, an art form. The study and appreciation of myths and the

truths that may lie within them seems to show that we still need our myths but that these myths must not offend our modern sensibilities.

We all have different points where further suspension of disbelief is not possible. Does this mean that communal worship is not possible without suspension of disbelief by several people in any single gathering? Yes, I think so.

So, when I express the impossibility of my believing in any God that I could define, I must retain my sympathy for those people who are courageous enough to take up the challenge of using words to make some approximation to what they experience as their God.

There some magnificent examples. Among my favourites are these:

You can't see it, because it has no form.

You can't hear it, because it makes no noise.

You can't touch it, because it has no substance.

It cannot be known in these ways

Because it is the all-embracing Oneness.

It is not high and light,

Or low and dark.

Indefinable yet continually present,

It is nothing at all.

It is the formless form,

the imageless image.

It cannot be grasped by the imagination.

It has no beginning and no end.

This is the essence of Tao.

Stay in harmony with this ancient presence,

And you will know the fullness of each present moment.

AND

The most important function of science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive..... It is very difficult to explain this feeling to anyone who is entirely without it. The individual feels the nothingness of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvellous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. He looks upon the individual existence as a sort of prison and wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole.

'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.'

Albert Einstein

AND

O my God, Light of lights and ruler of all the spheres; You are the first, there was none before You; You are the last, there shall be none after You. The angels cannot comprehend Your majesty and human beings cannot reach the knowledge of the perfection of Your Essence.

O God, set us free from the things that chain us, and deliver us from all evil that may hinder us. Send down upon our spirits Your gracious influence and irradiate our souls with the brilliance of Your light. The mind is only a drop in the ocean of Your Kingdom and the soul only a spark of Your Divine Glory.

Praise be to You whom no eyes can see, whose likeness no thought can imagine; to You be thanksgiving and praise. You give and You take away: You are the All-Bountiful and the All-Abiding. Praise be to You always, for Yours is the power over all things and unto You shall we return.

Suhrawardi Halabi, Islamic mystic in the Sufi tradition

But to return to J.B. Philips and his book "Your God is Too Small", he depicted various forms or concepts of God which he found stunting, even crippling, damaging or restricting to those who hold them.

There was God the resident policeman, the still small voice of conscience. He writes, "Conscience can so easily be perverted or morbidly developed in the sensitive person, and so easily ignored and silenced in the insensitive that it makes a very unsatisfactory God." And again, "There are many who are made miserable by a morbidly developed conscience which they quite wrongly consider to be the voice of God." My impression is that Unitarians are not so prone to this distortion as some in other kinds of Christianity whom I have met. Perhaps we are too rebellious to be bullied by a tyrannical conscience.

Then there was God, the Parental Hangover, the conception of whom is shaped by the experience we have had of our parents – perhaps loving and too indulgent; perhaps cold

and distant; perhaps authoritarian or even cruel. All these experiences, Phillips argues can lead to distorted ideas of God. We need to become aware of how our childhood experiences can affect our expectations of our God.

God, the Grand Old Man has been touched on today already. The problem with such a concept of God is that your God is seen as relatively remote, old-fashioned and out of touch with the conditions of the modern world, - good for Old Testament times and maybe for last century but not much relevant for today. We can pay him a passing respect and then forget him.

God, the Meek-and Mild as depicted by Phillips is too good for the real world. He is not supposed to get angry and neither are you if you believe in him. “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child” and “Christian children all must be, Mild, obedient, good as He.” Religion becomes something soft and sentimental, nothing to do with the workaday world, stuck somewhere in childhood before the hormones began rampaging through us. ‘Love’ becomes something embarrassingly uncritical and, as Phillips puts it, those forced to be loving in this way are never free to love in an honest and adult way.

God as Absolute Perfection can be a terrifying tyrant, as I had some experience of in late adolescence. As Phillips points out, “the conscientious, sensitive, imaginative person who is somewhat lacking in self-confidence and inclined to introspection, will find one-hundred-per-cent perfection truly terrifying. The more he thinks of it as God's demand, the more guilty and miserable he will become, and he cannot see any way out of his impasse. If he reduces the one hundred per cent, he is betraying his own spiritual vision, and the very God who might have helped him is the Author (so he imagines) of the terrific demands! No wonder he often 'breaks down'. The tragedy is often that the 'one-hundred-per-cent god' is introduced into the life of the sensitive by the comparatively insensitive, who literally cannot imagine the harm they are doing.”

Then there is my favourite, God as Pale Galilean. Phillips writes, and I quote, “If they were completely honest, many people would have to admit that God is to them an almost entirely negative force in their lives. It is not merely that He provides that 'gentle voice we hear . . . which checks each fault', but that His whole Nature seems to deny, to cramp, and inhibit their own. Though such people would never admit it, they are living endorsements of the nineteenth poet Swinburne's bitter lines

Thou halt conquered, O pale Galilean;

the world has grown grey from Thy breath.

Compared with their non-Christian contemporaries their lives seem to have less life and colour, 'less spontaneity and less confidence. Their god surrounds them with prohibitions but he does not supply them with vitality and courage. They may live under the shadow of his hand but it makes them pale, stunted and weak. Although the thought would appear blasphemous to his devotees, such a god is quite literally a blight upon human life, and no one can be surprised that he fails to attract the loyalty of those with spirit, independence, and a keen enjoyment of the colour and richness of life. “

“The words written above are a plain exposure of a false god, but of course the unhappy worshippers never see their bondage as clearly as that or they would break away, They are bound to their negative god by upbringing, by the traditions of a Church or party, by manipulation of isolated texts of Scripture or by a morbid conscience. At last they actually feel that it is wrong to be themselves, wrong to be free, wrong to enjoy beauty, wrong to expand and develop. Unless they have their god's permission they can do nothing. Disaster will infallibly bring them to heel, sooner or later, should they venture beyond the confines of 'his plan for them'.

“Such people, naturally enough, can only by strenuous efforts maintain their narrow loyalty. They do not get the chance to admire and love and worship in wordless longing One who is overwhelmingly splendid and beautiful and lovable. At best they can only love and worship because their god is a jealous God and it is his will and commandment that they should. Their lives are cramped and narrow and joyless because their God is the same.”

A savage denunciation! With which I heartily agree and probably you will too. I do not think many of these people are ever attracted to the Unitarian church, but if by some mistake they wandered in, their God would not let them ever come back.

Karen Armstrong depicts what we know of our Aryan ancestors long before the Old Testament prophets, back in the late Neolithic Age.:

The Ancient Vedic Search for God

From Karen Armstrong (1988) The Great Transformation: The World in the Times of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah. London: Atlantic Books

During the late Vedic period, the Aryans developed the idea of Brahman, the supreme reality. Brahman was not a deva, but a power that was higher, deeper, and more basic than the gods, a force that held all the disparate elements of the universe together, and stopped them from frag-

menting. Brahman was the fundamental principle that enabled all things to become strong and to expand. It was life itself. Brahman could never be defined or described, because it was all-encompassing: human beings could not get outside it and see it objectively. But it could be experienced in ritual. When the king arrived back safely from his raid, with the spoils of battle, he had become one with the brahman. He was now the axis, the hub of the wheel that would pull his kingdom together, and enable it to prosper and expand. Brahman was also experienced in silence. A ritual often ended with the brahmodya competition to find a verbal formula that expressed the mystery of the brahman. The challenger asked a difficult and enigmatic question, and his opponent answered in an equally elusive manner. The match continued until one of the contestants was unable to respond: reduced to silence, he was forced to withdraw.' The transcendence of the brahman was sensed in the mysterious clash of unanswerable questions that led to a stunning realization of the impotence of speech. For a few sacred moments, the competitors felt one with the mysterious force that held the whole of life together, . . . “.

As Donald Dewar said when he introduced an act for the recreation of a Scottish Parliament, “I like that.”