

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

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There is a sense in which we are all the journalists of existence. But it is important to remember that journalists are NOT scientists, They do not deal in replicable experiments using proven observational methods and systematic calculations, The conclusions of journalist's studies are something of a gamble, an assessable in probabilities rather than apparent certainties – and they like it that way. So how does a good journalist operate? I was never trained as a journalist but, for a year, I did read into a special subject in the Modern History of Europe Between the World Wars in my final honours year in Modern History in St Andrews. That special subject, at that time (1950s) was so close to the lives of those living through the period we were studying and who were still alive that we students used to joke that it was not really historiographical skills we were learning but more like journalistic skills.

A good journalist acquires as much information about their subject as they can. That may seem like the easy part, but missing or overlooking sources of information is a major journalistic crime, just as it is a crime in historical studies too.

Even as what purport to be 'facts' are being collected, and I put the word 'facts' in inverted commas, then, even as they come in

and are tested for credibility, these new discoveries affect the way in which the investigation develops, almost like in a crime novel. Sometimes a discovery early in the investigation can warp the whole process or a late addition to evidence can lead to a major change of view or even throw into doubt the whole set of conclusions that had seemed to be emerging. So what purport to be 'facts' come first in the journalistic exploration of existence, but these facts in journalism are much more slippery, changeable things than in 'proper science'.

Then, as any investigation or insightful assessment continues, a good journalist and a good historian makes careful judgements about the reliability and integrity of each of their sources. Questions about integrity of source might include: Does this writer have an aim in writing what they write? Does this speaker or this witness want to persuade me of something and, if so, what might that something be, and therefore how are they slanting their version of the truth to make me believe what they want me to believe? Or is this source so utterly convinced of some form of unreality that, it is clear, their beliefs distort the very ways in which they view and understand everything? What buried prejudices might lie in this particular writer's work which otherwise seems to be quite sane?

Then a really good journalist or historian begins to discern patterns within the most accurate information they have

collected. That discernment of patterns is the genius of the best history and the best journalism. A truly insightful writer sees a coherence in the best attested facts they have found, perhaps all supporting each other and making up a credible story. Sometimes, as with a playwright or a novelist, the one or two pieces of reliable information which do not fit the emerging credible pattern are the most fascinating features of the scene but, although a good journalist does not want inconsistency in their story, they must be honest about keeping in mind some anomalous apparent facts that do not fit the emerging picture and could still change the whole interpretation, if their significance were to be suddenly recognised..

Nevertheless a good journalist or historian is entitled to share with readers, whatever well-informed or educated guesses they can make, all the while acknowledging that they are guesses.

Finally a good journalist or historian uses their own judgement about what is really happening or about to happen (or, of course, in the case of the historian about what did happen). The risks to life, limb, family and freedom are normally small in interpreting history but some of the bravest people alive die every year as investigative journalists. These people take risks in the face of the unknown and as the journalist of existence that we are forced to be, we, each one of us, of course, take risks too. The famous French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, was

unsure whether an afterlife of heaven and hell as taught by the Roman church was likely to exist but he decided that, in view of the threats implied if he ignored the possibility, he had better believe and live as if he believed - a judgement of probabilities of the kind that all of us who ride this blue planet must make but not necessarily reaching the same decision based on the guess as Blaise Pascal made.

This service today is not meant to be just an examination of my particular beliefs and experiences. It is also an invitation to all of you to examine your beliefs and experiences if you are willing to accept the offer. This address is an untutored offering because I have not had time to enquire about what is taught about worship in various training schools for ministries or priesthoods, nor perhaps, do I very much care. So this is primitive untutored thought on my part and possibly the various schools of divinity will, metaphorically speaking, rise up and metaphorically throw their bibles at me. So this, by analogy with some pieces of art or music, is, in Art School terms a 'primitive' or 'naïve' train of thought, offered for your consideration. But I hope to set you off thinking for yourselves.

So, first, in my role as a worshipping atheist, I want to consider what we mean by worship and I want to begin doing that through a reading from a book called " In the Age of Noise" by Erling

Kagge pp 84-85 translated from the Norwegian by by Bucky L Cook and published in 2017

“Just before he died the neurologist Oliver Sacks focused on starry nights. He wrote about how to exchange ‘the hard problem’ of understanding how the brain gives rise to consciousness and other ambitions for the benefits of sitting alone gazing at the stars. “I saw the entire sky”, he wrote, “powdered with stars” in Milton’s words; such a sky, I imagined, could be seen only on high, dry plateaus like that of the Atacama in Chile (where some of the world’s most powerful telescopes are). It was celestial splendor that suddenly made me realise how little time I had, how little life I had left. My sense of the heaven’s beauty, of eternity was, inseparably for me mixed with a sense of transience – and death.’ When he wrote this Sacks was so weak that he could not walk and had to be pushed by his friends in a wheelchair out to the night sky. Right at the end of his life he began surrounding himself with metals and minerals as ‘little emblems of eternity’, a practice he had not engaged in since childhood.

In knowing yourself you know others. When I (Kragge) read Sacks, I feel that he, like Nansen, by turning his gaze upwards also turned it inwards, towards his inner silence and uncovered forgotten sides. Into that universe which to me is just as

mysterious as the outer space that surrounds us. One universe stretches outwards, the other inwards.

To me (Kragge, that is) the latter universe is of the greatest interest, for, as the poet Emily Dickinson rightly concluded: 'The Brain – is wider than the Sky.'

I read that passage from the Norwegian writer, Kragge, to you because to me what he describes Oliver Sacks as experiencing IS worship, uncluttered by any belief system, uncluttered any creed, or ritual or especially by the structured and imposed alien interpretations of any priesthood, Christian, Pagan or whatever and, most importantly, I discern no hint of subservience, of obedience or of demands being made by what Sacks appears to worship.

But this absence of subservience, of obedience or of demand being made on the worshipper is highly unusual in the history of worship in our Judeo-Christian traditions and even less so in that other great Abrahamic religion, that of Islam. In all the Abrahamic religions, the norm of worship, granted is also wonder and awe but it is also self-abnegation, subservience, obedience. Of course there may be local variations, but I am reminded of television pictures of rows of Muslims touching their heads on the ground in the Mosque in the way that I, early, learned they were expected to do in the presence of any powerful oriental potentate. Sometimes these potentates required their subjects

to crawl up the throne room towards them on their hands and knees. Even today in the UK, if you receive an honour from royalty, you are required to walk backwards from the royal person after you have received it. In one incident of the brutal expression of power and subservience in Medieval Christian Europe in 1072 the Holy Roman Emperor, the top secular power, was compelled to walk many miles barefoot, clad only in a penitent's hair shirt, through the Alpine winter snow to seek forgiveness for his attempt at defying the Pope. That was obeisance!! And in ancient Israel the people were rebuked by their prophets for 'bowing down before idols of wood and stone'. Even inanimate copies of sacred writings have to be treated with respect and 'the alleged LAWS of GOD' in the ten commandments have to be obeyed on pain of punishment – as no, doubt, the laws of Hummarabi, of the Medes and the Persian empire had to be obeyed, often on pain of death. Finally today subservience to some totalitarian governments is often on pain of death.

There is an Oxford English Dictionary version of the word "worship" passed on to us through Barry Bell from the Unitarian minister Ann Peart. "Worship" is a word apparently descended from the Anglo Saxon which means a valuing of importance in the same way, also descended from the Anglo-Saxon, that some English Mayors are referred to as "the worshipful, Sir" indicating that he or she is a very important person. This may

suffice for dictionaries but it cannot begin to convey how I imagine, from my own experience, Oliver Sacks experienced the night sky.

To me, none of that externally required and expected obeisance is worship but the spontaneous experience of Oliver Sacks under the stars is worship.

Then again, perhaps this reaction of wonder and awe that I would call worship is not at all what most people mean by worship but is nearest to what most people would call aesthetic appreciation? But I do not describe myself as ‘worshipping’ paintings or pieces of music because these aesthetic experiences do not elicit quite the same powerful sense of awe, even terror, as when, as a travelling journalist of existence, I review the sky, or the kingdom of the microbes or the amazing complexity of varieties of human relations and organisations or the wonders of the human mind, (for want of better words).

Next, let us consider what superficially might seem to be at the other extreme, what many people would not hesitate to label as atheism. Is this worship? Bertrand Russell, a mathematician and philosopher (now out of fashion) wrote an essay titled ‘A free man’s worship’ in “Mysticism and Logic” a book of essays published in 1918. Here is an extract which I used in the first service I ever took in this church which was on Death and it is a

sample of atheism at a white heat and in one of its purest forms. It is an awe-inspiring piece of prose in its own right.

"Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and on all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate for a moment his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power."

To me, Bertrand Russell's magnificent prose is also a form of worship, a forbidding, terrorizing form of worship but a form of worship, no less. Not a God of love, of family solidarity, of purity of thought and action, or even of "puppy eyes" and nurturance, but of worship none the less.

It may surprise you to be told that, to me, Bertrand Russell's kind of atheism always strikes me as inadequate, inadequate, magnificently eloquent as it is, because it is an atheism of only

physics and chemistry and it seems to acknowledge nothing of the atheisms of the academic disciplines of biology, of sociology, of politics and anthropology and, above all, as you might expect from me, the atheism of psychology.

So let us contemplate in the way that I have led you so often over more than twenty years and do not let my words and my perceptions stop you from experiencing your own as we go.

Many years ago, I came across the work of Rudolf Otto who wrote, in his book, 'The Idea of the Holy', about what he called "the numenous" and it had immediate meaning for me. At the time when I first read about it, I immediately identified an experience of 'the numenous' within my memory. This experience occurred the several times when I cycled nine miles out from Edinburgh, alone, to a Norman church in the village of Dalmeny. There, I could go alone and unhindered into the church and stand at the back looking at the Norman chancel with the small dark altar which was illuminated only by the evening sunlight from both sides and, still the young unthinking Christian of only twelve that I then was, I several times had a powerful and potentially transforming, experience of what Rudolf Otto calls 'the holy', of the possible mysterious presence of what to me at that time might well have been God as I had been taught about

him, an experience of what, I suppose, the Catholics might call 'adoration'. I have tried, long after, to re-experience that state of mind there in that place, but that church is now normally closed to the public following a series of thefts from within churches in the area.

Anne Casement of the British Jungian Analytic Association pointed to the need to keep the rational and the non-rational in some kind of relationship in dealing with religious matters and this chimes directly in with my my own description of myself many years ago as a rational mystic. She writes, "Otto depicted the numinous as both attractive and repellent in giving rise to feelings of supreme fascination and tremendous mystery, of nameless dread and fear and of submergence and personal nothingness before the awe-inspiring directly experienced object, the numinous raw material for religious humility. Otto quotes from the philosopher and early psychologist William James as follows: "The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted the HE was there than that I was. Indeed I felt myself, if possible, to be the less real of the two." This kind of experience can be elicited, for example by walking through a dark forest, by experiencing being on a mountain top, by gazing into the dark depths of a pool; by a host of situations, sights,

sounds and sensations. And I venture to suggest that it will be a rare person to whom something like this has never happened.

In the nineteenth century a group of anthropologists attempted to study religions in an evolutionary framework. These Darwinist anthropologists of the late nineteenth century noted that all over the world in different cultures, most of them organised on much smaller scales and less sophisticated than our own one, people endowed certain trees, certain springs, certain pools, certain places with a numinous quality that elicited awe, wonder and mystery, which, they experienced, alone or shared as a community. They named this kind of spiritual experience 'Animism', which possibly means they thought of animating animals and materials by endowing them with imaginary higher powers.

I think, myself, there is much merit in pursuing this theme of a Darwinian understanding of our individual religious experiences and the experiences of organised religion because we, today, have access to a theory of evolution and its apparent rich cornucopia of possible explanations and insights in a way that our ancestors never had, and we must never ignore the 'frontier', in American history terms, of exploration in all the social sciences.

It is no virtue of ours, nor any disrespect to those who have gone before us that we are now in a post-Darwinian Age. This may

mean that the concept of the Axial Age, first written about by Karl Jaspers and promulgated by Karen Armstrong, is intellectual 'old hat' too. We must disrespect all the thinking of our ancestors before the mid-nineteenth century because we live in a new axial age to which they never had entry, a post Darwinian age, also, incidentally, a post anthropological and psychological age. Incidentally and similarly, Freud was hailed as a great thinker, not because he got anything much right about psychology, but because he began a process of intellectual development, a kind of 'psychologising' (for want of a better word) of human behaviour which still continues as we write and talk. And we also live in a Post-Freudian age which our ancestors never experienced.

But Karl Jasper's concept of the Axial Age in which all the great world religions are claimed to have been born, perhaps towards the end of the iron age, is intellectual 'old hat' too. Many of us have, long ago, moved far beyond the well-grounded concept of the Axial Age. We must re-test, even disrespect all the thinking of our ancestors before the mid-nineteenth century because we live in a new axial age to which they never had entry, We live in a post Darwinian age, also, incidentally, a current anthropological and psychological age. Freud was hailed as a great thinker, not because he got anything much right about psychology but because he began a process of intellectual development, a kind of 'psychologising' (for want of a better

word) of human behaviour which still continues as we write and talk.

Probably because and it is widely speculated that, in evolutionary terms, the most primitive form of religion was and is called edwhich they called animism. The remains of animism are fully alive today all over Europe and here in Scotland where certain springs, wells, trees and rock formations elicit Rudolf Otto's experience of the numenous.

Perhaps the next step beyond the basic experience of the numenous, of "the holy", is the endowment of the stimulant of it with a personality. We humans are indefatigable personifiers. We love to personify natural phenomena. We ascribe names and human characteristics to our toys (think Teddy Bear), to rabbits (think Peter Rabbit) even to railway engines (think Thomas the Tank Engine) and then, once these inanimate objects are seen as having human characteristics, they are somehow seen as potentially more understandable and even predictable! So, the argument runs, that with evolutionary development our primitve animism developes into personification and so we develop beliefs in gods with human characteristics and finally in one over-arching God who, despite his several human characteristics, revengeful, merciful, righteous, etc., etc., is the creator and ruler, the intelligent designer, the untimate power.

And people brought up like you and me are taught the existence of one all-powerful being to which we are trained to direct all our experiences of the numenous – like me in the church facing the power and the beauty with which I invested the altar in that old Norman church in Dalmeny.

I used to describe myself as a rationalist mystic, saying that my rationalism was the critical part of me and the mystic was the feeling, experiencing part of me. But I always felt that to call myself a mystic was a step too far, a claim too much. I was not like the Sufi's or the celebrated medieval Christian mystics like Theresa of Avila or Juilan of Norwich, yet there was a streak of similarity there, none the less. So now I can much more happily classify myself as more like a worshipping atheist.

I have long since detached my other experiences of the numenous from what I was taught in the Christian faith. For example I can vividly remember a wonderful experience of a swelling recall of Sibelius's seventh symphony as I stood by the shores of Loch Long and the sun set behind the dark outline of the hills across the loch and the dying sky was refleted in the brilliant ribbon of the loch and the stars came out on the deep dark blue sky, slowly blackening above me and pin-pointed with newly visible lights. There was nothing of my religious upbringing in that. It was almost a pure experience of the numenous. So, as time has gone on, I have separated my

experiences of the numenous, my plain sense of worship, from the teachings, images and symbols of the religion I was brought up in. And that is what I need to do further. I need to disentangle my true religiosity, my experiences of the numenous from my religious upbringing. But I am also aware that, as my atheism advances I am in danger of several forms of vandalism, of losing my sense of worship along with the loss of my beliefs, as we rationalistic atheists inadvertently cause so many people to do.

This service is not meant to be just an examination of my particular beliefs and experiences. It is also an invitation to all of you to examine your beliefs and experiences if you are willing to accept the offer.

This meeting is a church only in so far as it a meeting to share worship. Some have complained that it is a mere intellectual philosophical debating society, others that it is only a social community, or even just a lonely hearts club or a gossip exchange. Last century it would have a dating agency also. It may be, and perhaps is, all of these things in addition but it is not a church unless it is about worship and to me worship is about numerous experiences, the sharing of them and the refreshment or our sense of awe, wonder and humility, our re-affirmation together that humans may be the peak of evolutionary development as we know it, but we are not the centre of the universe, nor its reason for being.