

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



“Where is your God?” They Say

By Jim Stearn

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Introduction

This presentation (it is a presentation rather than a piece or anything else) comes from our good friend Jim Stern. You may recall that Jim wrote a series of articles about James Martineau for our Newsletter a few months ago. Martineau was a formidable theologian of the nineteenth century and a Unitarian.

Modern Unitarians often have an issue about the word 'God'. What do we mean when we use it? Is it exclusively owned by the Old Testament or is it just a word to personify what we can't otherwise describe adequately?

This presentation may help.

Tony McNeile

"Where is your God?" They Say

An essay in one short story, seven readings, a hymn and a commentary on it...

Story: Andromeda and the Leviathan of Parsonstown

Parsonstown is a small town on the Offaly-Tipperary border in rural Ireland where the mediaeval castle of Birr, ancestral home of the Earls of Rosse, stands in extensive grounds.

Here, during the early 1840s, there was a leviathan to be seen: not a monstrous creature or a gigantic Irishman (although the ancient myths of Ireland contain lots of giants). It was a huge astronomical telescope.

William Parsons, the Third Earl of Rosse, designed it and had it built in the castle workshops. This included casting and grinding a bowl-shaped mirror six feet across to a degree of accuracy of less than the thickness of one sheet of paper, using a huge machine like a pendulum built just for this purpose. Officially called the 'Rosse Six-foot

Telescope', its massive geared and counterbalanced mountings ensured that it soon became known by the name of the Leviathan of Parsonstown.

It is a reflecting telescope of 72 inches (1.8 m) aperture, which made it the largest and most powerful telescope in the world from its commissioning in 1845 until the construction of the 100 inch (2.5 m) Hooker Telescope on Mount Wilson in 1917.

When the new telescope was finally ready to be trained on the night sky, Lord Rosse did what any astronomer of his day would have done: he turned it to observe an object known as the Andromeda Nebula. This smudge of light had baffled astronomers since The Persian Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi described it as a "small cloud" in his *Book of Fixed Stars* around 964. *All of the great astronomers ever since including Galileo and Herschel had failed to make anything of it. It was officially catalogued as Messier 31, in a list of 103 mysterious distant objects compiled by the French astronomer Anton Messier*

With his powerful new telescope, Lord Rosse instantly saw the distinctive spiral shape of a galaxy, a marvel he was the first human being to see. With a heroic leap of Celtic intuition he realised that we too are living within such a structure, The Milky Way

Lord Rosse went on to discover other spiral galaxies further and further away. No less than 35 Messier objects turned out to be spiral galaxies, and the rest were identified as nebulae and star clusters.

The Universe was shown to be far vaster, far more complex and far older than anyone had imagined. The Bible's simple model of the universe as everything circling round the Earth, all created out of nothing about six thousand years ago, was demolished by a greater blow than by any other single scientific discovery before or since. This ignited the still continuing dispute between literally minded Bible Christians and secular scientifically minded rationalists. The great split between science and religion in the 1850s was about the vast expanses of interga-

lactic space and geological time - the Darwinian controversy over human evolution still lay decades in the future.

Until 1914, anyone wishing to witness the spiral nature of galaxies had to come to Birr. Hundreds came from across Europe and beyond, to observe the stars with Lord Rosse or simply to marvel at this feat of engineering. Now magnificently restored, it remains arguably the largest historic scientific instrument still working today. It is unquestionably Ireland's greatest scientific wonder and a masterpiece of human creative genius.

Reading 1: Extract from *The Seat of Authority* by James Martineau:

Whether, in the movements of reason, he descends to us, or we ascend to him, it is by the path of law which stretches across the spaces of the world, and which is in one direction the wayfarer's track and in the other the highway for our God. Is it not childish, then, to be terrified out of our religion by the mere scale of things, and, because the little Mosaic firmament is broken in pieces, to ask whether its divine ruler is not also gone? Do you fear, because the earth has dwindled to a sand-grain? So much the more glorious is the field in which it lies; so much the more numerous the sentinels of eternal equilibrium, the brilliant witnesses of order, rank upon rank, that pass always the same "word": "There is no chaos here."

Reading 2: Extract from the Gospel of Luke 17:20-22 (KJV) :

And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

Reading 3: Extract from: *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting The Banks Of The Wye During A Tour. July 13, 1798* by William Wordsworth

“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.”

Reading 4: The Great Surmise

Dr Carl Scovell, emeritus UU minister at Boston, Massachusetts.

“The Great Surmise says simply this: At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. This is the supreme mystery of our lives. This goodness is ultimate- not fate, not freedom, not mystery, energy, order, nor finitude, but this good intent in creation is our source, our centre, and our destiny. Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict- not even survival- is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised Joy.”

Reading 5: the final written words of Juliana of Norwich (c. 1342 – c. 1416)

“Wouldst thou know the meaning of this thing? Learn it well. Love was His meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee? Love. Wherefore shewed it He? For Love. “

Reading 6: Extract from *The Winthrop Woman*, (1958)

Anya Seton (1904-1990). ..

A ray of sunlight started down between the tree trunks. It touched the pool with liquid gold. The pool became transparent to its green depths and her self was plunged in those depths and yet upraised with joy upon the rushing wind. The light grew stronger and turned white. In this crystal whiteness there was ecstasy. Against the light she saw a wren fly by; the wren was made of rhythm, it flew with meaning, with a radiant meaning. There was the same meaning in the caterpillar as it inched along the rock, and the moss, and the little nuts which had rolled across the leaves.

And still the apperception grew, and the significance. The significance was bliss, it made a created whole of everything she watched and touched and heard - and the essence of this created whole was love. She felt love pouring from the light, it bathed her with music and with perfume; the love was far off at the source of the light, and yet it drenched her through. And the source and she were one.

The minutes passed. The light moved softly down, and faded from the pool. The ecstasy diminished, it quietened, but in its stead came a serenity and sureness she had never known.

The final reading is No. 42 in the World's oldest Unitarian hymnbook, the Book of Psalms. This three thousand-years old cry from the heart twice asks "Where is your God?" The first time the Psalmist is being assailed by his doubts and inner anguish asking him this question, and the second time it is his fellow men who daily ask him the same question. With his soul in torment. he yet trusts in his experiences of the love of God, longs for more, and hopes against hope that they will recur in yet greater intensity.

Reading 7: Psalm 42 (KJV):

¹ As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.

² My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?

³ My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God?

⁴ When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.

⁵ Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.

⁶ O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar.

⁷ Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.

⁸ Yet the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the day time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life.

⁹ I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

¹⁰ As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?

¹¹ Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.

Hymn: "Where is Your God?" They Say

James Martineau tune: Nun danket

"Where is your God?" they say: Answer them, O Most Holy!

Reveal your secret way of visiting the lowly:
Not wrapped in moving cloud, or nightly resting fire;
But veiled within the shroud of silent high desire.

Come not in flashing storm, or bursting frown of thunder:
Come in the viewless form of wakening love and wonder;
In duty grown divine the restless spirit still;
In sorrows taught to shine as shadows of your will.

O God, the pure alone, e'en in their deep confessing,
Can see you as their own and find a perfect blessing.
Yet to each waiting soul speak in your still small voice,
Till broken love's made whole, and saddened hearts rejoice

Commentary on “Where is your God”? They Say:

I shall attempt to unpack and explain this hymn, unquestionably James Martineau’s greatest.

Martineau begins with this quote from Psalm 42 (7):

“As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?”

This reminds us that intuitive atheism and its aggressive expression towards believers have a very long ancestry. In Martineau’s time the question gained greater force and urgency with the acceleration of scientific discovery. The wondrous new telescope in Ireland that revealed the immensity of the Universe, and microscopes of increasing power revealing the infinite complexity of the living world, led many to believe that everything would ultimately be explained in this way. Many went on to the further step that only the physically observable exists. Auguste Comte published his ‘Positive Philosophy’ in 1850, declaring that humanity had lived through the “Age of Superstition” and the “Age of Metaphysics” and was now entering the “Age of Science” when all questions would be decided by scientific research. His English translator and greatest

publicist was Harriet Martineau, James's sister, causing a rift that led to them never communicating after 1850. This hymn is possibly a reply to her. Scientific atheists to this day are echoing Comte, although most have never heard of him and like to claim that they have intuited their ideas for themselves as obvious and self-evident. Martineau feared the long-term effect of such thinking, but said that rational believers had to go with the science, which he was sure was ultimately compatible with a considered faith.

Recall that in our reading from Luke (1), Jesus said that: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." It is useless to search for God or heaven with a telescope, even the most powerful, but in the ideal world that makes up much of our experience, giving it meaning and an aesthetic, giving colour, value and meaning to inanimate objects in the physical world and making them part of the world as we find it and which we navigate in normal daily life. James Martineau once said in a sermon: "Heaven is a part of our religion, not a branch of geography".

Answer them,

In addition to those who deny God's existence, other people have concluded that "God" is ultimately a game of the human intellect, albeit a game they are happy to play. Martineau here asserts that the power or spirit that we call "God" by many names really exists independently of our will. So we may address a question to it, and so it can answer.

.....O Most Holy!

Martineau affirms that we should deeply revere what we identify as God as in the first line of the Prayer of Jesus: "Our father, who art in heaven, HALLOWED BE THY NAME.

Reveal your secret way of visiting the lowly:

All we know of God's loving nature comes from the testimony of all those humans who for millennia have felt the tidal pull of the Spirit (4), who like Wordsworth (3) have sensed its presence rolling through all things, or who have experienced the timeless moment of joy described by Anya Seton in *The Winthrop Woman* (6), or been vouchsafed glimpses of the placid totality of experience in the Divine dimension.

The deepest roots of religion spring from such intensely personal mystical experiences, which may be called "the timeless moment" as they involve direct experience of a timeless, dimensionless and infinitely beautiful Divine milieu. Some of you, perhaps all of you, may already have been vouchsafed such intensely joyful episodes. This great heritage is a big part of why we come together in prayer and worship.

The convincing nature of these episodes connects all who have undergone them in a fellowship of belief. There are many heroes of it, such as Juliana of Norwich (5) Faced with the cumulative power of this phenomenological evidence, Richard Dawkins was forced to discount every single case as "the God Delusion" with no proof beyond his own presuppositions that this was so.

There was a once a man in Palestine called Jesus who seems to have learned a better way to access the Divine dimension, which he termed "The Kingdom of God" (1 et al), becoming so transformed by this that God-consciousness seems to have shone out of him for those with eyes to see, as he spread the Word that this gift was for all

The "lowly" is a reference to Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Not wrapped in moving cloud, or nightly resting fire;

This is a reference to Exodus 13:21

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night:

This tells us that the “most holy” is not the warlike and vengeful God Jehovah of the Old Testament.

But veiled within the shroud of silent high desire.

Martineau rounds off the first verse as he began it, alluding to Psalm 42's expressions of the Psalmist's fervent lust for greater experience of the Divine (7). The first two verses are:

“As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?”

Profound religious experience is often apt to be erratic and unpredictable, creating a hunger for more which is in effect the great religious quest of mankind. The veil or shroud between man and God is a common Victorian theme, akin to when Paul says (1 Corinthians 13:12)

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Come not in flashing storm, or bursting frown of thunder:

This reference is unfamiliar to modern readers, but was full of significance to Victorians. English Evangelicalism had been characterised by the Methodism of John Wesley who had reacted against the 18th Century growth of an easy-going theism by reasserting personal salvation from sin. His counterpart in the USA was a minister in Woodstock, Connecticut named Jedidiah Morse, who during the early 1800s formalised

its list of 'fundamentals'. The third fundamental asserts the Divine authority and sufficiency of scripture, effectively saying that where science conflicted with the literal truth of the Bible, science had to be wrong. These fundamentals still have many adherents in churches taken over by the Evangelical Alliance, although they seem as unaware of being followers of Jedidiah Morse as 'scientific atheists' are of being disciples of Auguste Comte. As well as a preoccupation with thunder and lightning exemplifying the wrath of God, the transplanted American heritage also included everlasting "hellfire and damnation" without which US preachers said they could not manage, neither of which have lasted. Martineau is saying in shorthand that their God is not his God.

Come in the viewless form of wakening love and wonder;

In contrast Martineau advocates the Unitarian way of devotional quietism, the consciousness of love and joy described in our readings (4, 5, 6).

In duty grown divine the restless spirit still;

Martineau here says that a believer can calm spiritual unease by dutiful service of God's will. He had undergone a lasting religious conversion in his early twenties, giving up a promising career in civil engineering for the ministry. During a study sabbatical in Berlin in 1850 he underwent a profound philosophical rebirth, after which he taught Immanuel Kant's emphasis on inner motivation. He rejected what he called the "ancestral curse" of original sin in favour of the innate birthright knowledge of God's will, a universal blessing of their newborn. When this is informed in adult life by the teachings of Jesus who brought the Divine *logos to humanity, when focussed by prayer and worship, we develop 'conscience', which is the highest and best in ourselves showing how we must use our free wills to build a better future. Such intuitive ethics can be untrustworthy, but Martineau made conscience God-given and so outside our wills, Martineau rejected*

Hegel's alternative view that all motivation was external, seeking gratification or avoiding pain, and that children are born with a blank sheet and shaped by their environment. This was the foundation of the systems of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, and their discipline of sociology making economic determinism shape history. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill proposed an ethics of utilitarianism and pragmatism, external motivation seeking "good", which now dominates human affairs and is responsible for the greedy destruction of our environment, which is no longer regarded as God's creation entrusted to our conscientious stewardship.

This line and the next are omitted from the Green Hymnbook, by the liberal faction that took over Unitarianism who were deeply wedded to Hegelian thought and empirical pragmatism. They subscribed to the sociological theory of secularisation, that traditional devotional faith was finished and a church had to look for alternatives to survive. Now we can see that secularisation has run its course, and that a process of desecularisation is restoring faith all over the planet. We also see that abandoning the old high Unitarianism has not put the promised bottoms on pews over the decades. Martineau rejected Utilitarianism because promised benefits all too often fail to materialise.

In sorrows taught to shine as shadows of your will.

This line combines the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and the Great Surmise (4) with Martineau's belief that the location of the Divinity in man is to be found in the will, accessible by prayer and worship. A shadow is how a higher dimension appears in a lower one, as our three-dimensional selves make a two-dimensional shadow on the ground.

The next two lines, the beginning of the last verse, are also omitted from the Green Hymnbook. They are puzzling and if taken in isolation as affirmative present a repulsive self-righteousness.

**O God, the pure alone, e'en in their deep confessing,
Can see you as their own and find a perfect blessing.**

I think that this is an ironic critique of the Calvinist doctrine of the elect, those saved by predetermined Grace from the mire of sinful everyday life and earmarked for salvation, because Martineau continues:

Yet to each waiting soul speak in your still small voice,

This more Universalist sentiment is an antidote to Calvinist doctrines, then still part of the Unitarian heritage as Presbyterians but which Martineau wished to shed. Jesus clearly taught that the divinity in humans was accessible to all.

Till broken love's made whole, and saddened hearts rejoice

This is the conviction found in June Boyce-Tilman's splendid hymn "We sing a love" found in the Purple Hymnbook although not set to her specified tune of *Woodlands*. *The last verse, slightly changed with her permission, is:*

We sing the Holy Spirit, loving, calm,
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,
brings to our wounds its gracious healing balm:
come, radiant love, live in our hearts today

Conclusion:

I hope that I have shown you that a whole wealth of wisdom, philosophy and theology is packed into these few lines, so well crafted that it remains a devotional hymn fit for use in worship.

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Brigg July 2015

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

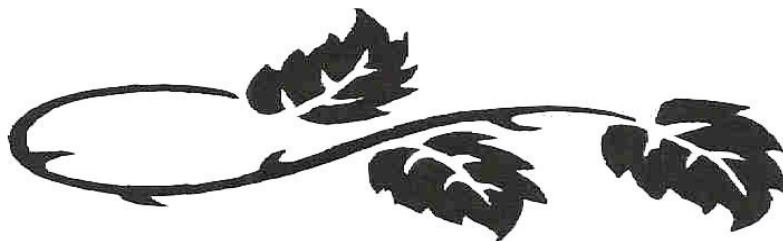
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