

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Social Responsibility – Why bother?

by Rev Ernest Baker

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INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a series, which looks at how the faith of individual Unitarians informs their approach to social responsibility, as well as looking at what the role of social responsibility plays in the movement.

Our first contributor is Rev Ernest Baker, who presented the following item at the NUF AGM. Ernest's long contribution to the training of Unitarians becomes clear through the many examples he draws on from various writers through history and the biblical text. Having been tutor for the "Use of Unitarian History in Worship", since 1994, makes him almost the longest serving Tutor of the "modern era". He has long been involved in teaching "The Worship Studies Course" which is seen as an essential plan for future training needs overall. For the past two years he has also been Tutor for the "World Religions in a Unitarian Context" Module. In spite of these heavy commitments Ernest has continued to recognise his need, to be socially responsible, having been the Honorary Secretary of the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund.

I would encourage those readers, who are able, to contribute to this series, by sending me their account of faith and commitment to the well being of the wider community. Any items from 500 – 2,500 words would be very welcome.

Joan Wilkinson

Unitarians & Social Responsibility by Rev Ernest Baker

For a teen of years, I have served as Honorary Secretary of the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund, doing the basic administration of sending groups of children from disadvantaged backgrounds for holidays at the Nightingale Centre in Derbyshire. See the website for details: www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk: I hope you, and your congregation support us! I am very passionate about it.

My task is almost a no-brainer; what to say beyond the obvious. Being a Unitarian implies a commitment to social responsibility. But let's consider a little more; why and how? And why bother?

Here follows a bit of biblical study, a bit of theology, some of me.

Christian history is suffused with the debate of "Faith" vs "Works". Why am I referring to the Judeo-Christian tradition? Well it is my ethnic faith, with whose spiritual symbols and signposts I am most familiar.

The Epistle of James in the Christian Scriptures (The "New Testament"), states "faith without works is dead". It has been described as "A manual of practical religion": it has always been popular with Unitarians, of the previous generation at least. The writer cautions against claiming you have "Faith" if you do nothing to show it, but interestingly in fact mentions Faith early on, and considers by implication motivation for doing. There are some notes on the Greek words used, and English translation in the King James' & Revised English Bibles in further notes at the end of the article. [see especially 1vv5-6; 2vv14-26; 3vv13,7; 4vv5,6]

Moving swiftly on some 1500 years, compare this with **Martin Luther**, the 500th Anniversary of whose Reformatory "95 theses" was marked last year, who described the epistle dismissively as "the epistle of straw". As a Catholic monk, he had tried to feel "justified" (i.e., OK about himself, and his life and being, and his relation to the Almighty), by doing "good works", scrupulously - and failed.

Luther elicited the notion of "Salvation by Grace through Faith", often misquoted as "Salvation by Faith" - motto of Protestantism - implying it is: a) not a matter of right intellectual believing, and b) beyond our human making.

Moving on again, we can compare this with the Unitarian "Salvation by Character" statement in the C19th "Five Principles" of **James Freeman Clarke**, which you might find still hanging up somewhere in your Chapel.

(Hanging in there is of course, no pun intended, the question of what do we mean by "Salvation"? Well, for present purposes I am thinking in terms of how to be a proper human being).

So on to now - and me! I find a resolution of the seeming contradiction in **Paul Tillich's** 20th Century, elucidation of the true meaning of "Faith", as expressed not least in his "The Dynamics of Faith", first published in 1953, which means it is probably now about contemporary for theology! He was German, fled Nazism to America in the 1930s.

Tillich was Lutheran, tracing a line from the Apostle Paul (the corrupter of Christianity in the view of some scholars;) - to Augustine the mediaeval scholar who in my view should have ignored his mother and married the pagan lass - to Luther. Tillich was also a great friend of the Unitarian **James Luther Adams**, whose writings I commend to your attention.

He, Tillich, offers an "equation" well a sort of "equation"; but the funny symbol, =>, which comes from mathematics, does not mean "equals", but "implies".

Faith (the Greek '*pistis*' of the well-known ICor13) => **Love** => **Action**

Faith precedes: but is defined, note well, rather as a disposition, an orientation of the soul one is, an 'existenz', a human "being" ... not a set of intellectual beliefs.

Tillich used various terms to elucidate: "unconditional concern" is possibly the best known; I like "the state of being grasped by the power of being itself" (somewhat echoing the work of C19th Century Theologian Schleiermacher, whose Romantic, capital "R", "Theology of Feeling", I studied in ministerial training in Manchester)

This is an antidote to the seeping-in of our own needs compromising our action - which in the extreme is the "bleeding hearts" problem with which for example such as the *Daily Mail* characterises "social workers" (compare again the Epistle of James, which I think recognises this; and, for example, the words of the Bhagavad Gita in the South

Asian religious tradition - motivation for "good works" matters! One translation has Goodness; Passion; Darkness for a decreasing level of worthy motivation.)

In this notion of Faith, in practice there is a need for encouragement in this wavering disposition, for example through regular shared worship.

There is a need too to counter discouragement that doing what we can, and merely that, is somehow not enough. I take comfort in these words, surely known to some of you, of Oscar Romero:

***"We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in realising that.
This enables us to do something and to do it very well."***

I offer a caution for any volunteer: as someone once put it, "70% of any job is boring!": checking the figures, paying in at the bank, sending the cheques; writing the minutes, preparing the agenda properly, making careful notes in the meeting; following up if something promised has been done. If your motivation is ego-driven, then you will soon tire of the task.

I grew up with my mother's adage, which of course in early years I more or less dismissed, "***Duty makes us do things well; love makes us do them beautifully!***"

I hope someone will want to prove me wrong, say it is a wicked calumny, but it seems to me today's volunteers, including amongst us, are too ready to be asking "what is in it for me?" - and forgetting doing stuff "to the glory of God, and the service of humankind", as it used to be described.

In somewhat more grandiose fashion I want to really finish with a seemingly-prescient quote from **Raymond Holt: The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England 1938, rev. ed. 1952)**

"Men and women in the 20th century will try to resolve their problems in their own way, but, if they abandon those ideals of truth, lib-

erty, humanity and democracy which animated the best minds of the 19th century, the time may come when historians of the future will look back with longing on that century as, in some ways, a little oasis in the history of mankind. And as later generations painfully take up again the work of striving to create a society in which the head is held high and the mind is free, they will wonder, why those who came before them lost their nerve, and threw away the gains of centuries.”

Some further notes:

The Epistle of James: c.f. Authorised K J Version and Revised English Bible

1vv5-6; *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. [KJV];

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God and it will be given him, for God is a generous giver who neither grudges nor reproaches anyone.

But he who asks must ask in faith, with never a doubt in his mind; for the doubter is like a wave of the sea tossed hither and thither by the wind. [REB]

(q.v. 2vv14-26)

2v20: *But wilt thou know, o vain man, that faith without works, is dead. [KJV]*

Do you have to be told, you fool, that faith divorced from action is futile? [REV]

3vv13,17: *Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.*

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle

and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. [KJV]

Which of you is wise or learned? Let him give practical proof of it by his right conduct with the modesty which comes of wisdom.

But the wisdom from above is in the first place pure; and then peace-loving, considerate and open-minded; it is straightforward and sincere, rich in compassion and in deeds of kindness which are its fruit. [REB]

4vv5,6: *Do you think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?*

But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. [KJV]

Or do you suppose that scripture has no point when it says that the spirit which God implanted in us is filled with envious longings?

But the grace he gives is stronger; thus scripture says, 'God opposes the arrogant and gives grace to the humble'. [REB]

The Greek words:

kenos: vain [KJV]; worthless [REB]; vainglorious; empty; pretentious; hollow

argos: dead [KJV]; futile [REV]: idle; lazy; thoughtless

karis : "grace" - in a new Christian sense of the divine *favour* [gracefulness, graciousness, favour, a favour, gratitude - in early Greek literature]

pistis : faith;

ergon : works

James Freeman Clarke's '5 Principles'

In 1885, Clarke outlined his "Five Points of the New Theology," which summarized commonly held Unitarian beliefs of the late-nineteenth century:

“...the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”

Paul Tillich's definition of Faith

Faith as Ultimate Concern (from L Scott Smith: *Quodlibet Journal*)

“For Tillich, ‘ultimate concern’ is the phrase that best captures the meaning of faith and, in the broadest sense, of religion as well. He described this concern in various ways. To do that, he employed expressions such as ‘unconditional seriousness,’ ‘unconditional concern,’ ‘infinite concern,’ ‘directedness toward the Unconditional,’ ‘the state of being grasped by the power of being itself,’ ‘the dimension of depth.’ His biographer, Wilhelm Pauck, pointed out that the German verb Tillich used, **angeht**, is inadequately translated ‘concern’ and actually means ‘coming upon one,’ just as the German verb **ergriffen**, translated ‘to grasp,’ more accurately connotes being deeply moved or laid hold of by something. For Tillich, then, faith is that which comes upon a person, deeply moving and taking hold of him or her, such that no conditions or limitations can be placed upon its seriousness.

The phrase ‘ultimate concern,’ Tillich explained, possesses a certain felicitous ambiguity. It refers both to the act of faith (*fides qua creditur*) and to the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*). In other words, the act of being ultimately concerned regards the object of one’s ultimate concern. This aspect of faith signals what the mystics have always taught; i.e. that faith overcomes the subject-object split. As he observed, ‘The ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same.’

Human beings, Tillich stated, possess many concerns, some of which are spiritual in nature. Cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and political concerns are among those that become urgent and are elevated to the level of ultimacy. When a concern is given ultimacy, it takes on an essentially religious character. It becomes ‘the abstract translation’ of

the Shema. As such, it demands total surrender of the self. Not only that, but it also promises complete fulfilment. This dual aspect of faith defines the primacy of its claim and accounts for the overwhelming effect of the claim upon one's life.

Tillich identified faith with the phenomenon that Otto described as 'the holy.' Within the holy, there are both attractive and repellent forces. The 'holy' nature of one's ultimate concern highlights its capacity to heal as well as to destroy the person.

In so far as faith involves an experience of the holy, it is certain. But it is also uncertain inasmuch as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being. The uncertainty of faith is attributable to an irremovable element within it. It is an element of existential risk that must be affirmed by courage. Phrased another way, the only certainty of faith is the passion and self-surrender it inspires by virtue of its ultimacy in the person's life. Its uncertainty regards its content, the truth of which one can never be immediately aware. Hence, endemic to any act of faith is the risk that the concrete content of one's ultimate concern is only preliminary. This risk gives rise to doubt.

One can, according to Tillich, be ultimately concerned about anything, including but not limited to one's personal success, a national sovereignty, a political and social vision, the quest for scientific truth, or the God of the Bible. The content of faith, while of infinite importance to the believer, is not significant with respect to its formal definition. Yet elevating to ultimacy a concern that is merely preliminary defines idolatry. The problem with an idolatrous concern is that when 'it proves to be a failure, the meaning of one's life breaks down; one surrenders oneself . . . to something which is not worth it.'

Faith, for Tillich, always involves the entire personality. 'It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements.' The conscious and the unconscious, the ego and the superego, the cognitive, the emotional, and the voluntary functions are all included in faith as a centered act of the total personality. But faith is not simply the sum total of these elements. It transcends each of them, although it has 'a

decisive impact' upon each. In any given act of faith, any one of these elements can be dominant. The dominant element, however, never creates faith. Faith can never be born of a feeling, a thought, or an act of the will. To define it in such a way would constitute a 'distortion.'

Oscar Romero: On taking the long view

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our life-time only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,

which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith

No confession brings perfection

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No programme accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about....

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,

And there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do something and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,

A step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference

between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers not master builders,
ministers not Messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Raymond Holt: Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England (1938/reprint 1952)

“Men and women in the 20th century will try to resolve their problems in their own way, but, if they abandon those ideals of truth, liberty, humanity and democracy which animated the best minds of the 19th century, the time may come when *historians of the future* will look back with longing on that century as, in some ways, a little oasis in the history of mankind. And as later generations painfully take up again the work of striving to create a society in which the head is held high and the mind is free, they will wonder, why those who came before them *lost their nerve*, and *threw away* the gains of centuries.”

Cautionary further study!

DVD: Film: 1982: *The Vision*: Dirk Bogarde, Lee Remick

Book

Paul Tillich: *The Dynamics of Faith* (mentioned above)

Raymond V Holt: (mentioned above) Stephen Pattison: *The Faith of the Managers: When Management becomes Religion*: Cassell; 1997

Comments -

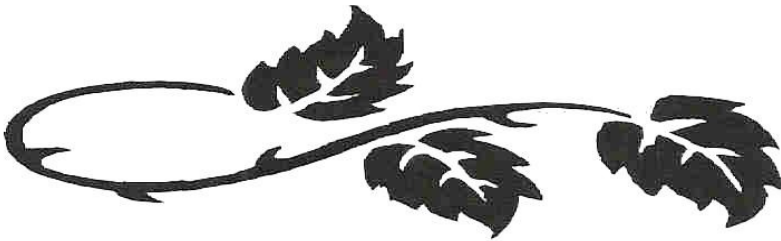
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