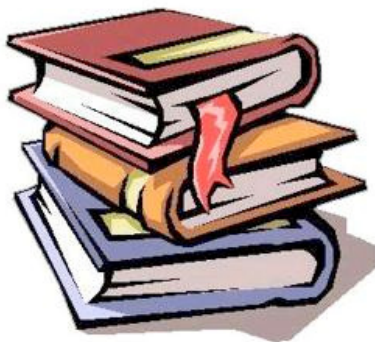


National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
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Viewpoint



Theological Education by Adrian Worsfold

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Introduction

In this ViewPoint Adrian challenges the relationship we Unitarians as a community have with our tradition. Looking back we can see that a community develops a theology for its time and sometimes we can question the veracity of that theology. If anything we need to use our tradition as a springboard for discussing who we are today and what we now stand for as a community in theological terms. And not just our own 'Christian that became Unitarian' tradition but include others too. It may not be enough for us to say that we are more a collection of individuals than a community. We need to discover the spiritual driver that bonds us into a community of Unitarians today.

Your comments on the article can be submitted to the NUF newsletter.

Tony McNeile

Theological Education by Adrian Worsfold

Theological education has a parallel with musical education. Whilst one might learn about music, but be unable to participate, a full and rounded musical education includes creating an understanding and involvement in the practice of music.

It is the same with theology - otherwise all that we have is religious studies. Good music enriches, even changes us: and so should good theology. Good music is transmitted through traditions and through communities of practice: and so is theology. Good theological practice involves understanding ecclesiastical arrangements and identities.

What does good mean in this sense? It means good sources, knowing, practices, skills. It will involve handling the classics...

So theology involves both knowledge and skill. Knowledge means knowing about a tradition or traditions, and skill means working those traditions to more deeply understand them and then using them in the contemporary setting - including in the most radical even disturbing manner.

Skill involves participation, perhaps in meditation with instruction from Buddhism (for example), or worship with instruction from a Christian, Sikh or Jewish tradition (for example). Skill means care, pausing before acting, seeking reflective feedback, even counting the numbers.

On this basis, being theologically Unitarian is to examine and participate in its history and in its ever more competing and complementing traditions of meanings. It means becoming skillful in using the worship that is itself a two-way communication of those meanings from the texts and back into them.

Developing out of a tradition and rejecting its creeds is a form of belonging to it. To know why they are rejected, involves engaging in a dialogue with them. It may well be that from there one does want to move on.

But first pause a while and double-back before making the main argument: it is advisable to look at some easily used (too easily used) means of *textual* identity by communities.

Early Unitarianism, developed either out of the Renaissance and Reformation under the shadow of nearby Turkish power, or evolved from Presbyterian and Congregational

groups. It was on the left wing of the Reformation, but it went back to New Testament roots as much as did other 'right wing' Reformation Churches.

if you were engaged in reading the New Testament Epistle of the later 'Paul' in I Timothy 3:16 and II Timothy 2.11-13 you would be asked to answer the baptismal questions

Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?
Do you believe in Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord?' and
Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the Church and in the resurrection?'

Not so long ago a Unitarian would have answered 'yes' to all three questions (if not in such a formalised baptism) because such a Unitarian knew that this Economic Trinity was not the 'Doctrine of the Trinity'.

The three questions as statements are compatible with Arianism (of early and Reformation kinds) and even classical Unitarianism. If you don't think this is so, look at some even late nineteenth century Unitarian liturgies for references to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Christ, Son, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ', the Church, even the resurrection. Actually, look at Orders of Worship in 1932.

The shift since then has been very marked, and not just by Unitarians who no longer choose to use Orders of Worship. Nowadays, no one in the mainstream is seriously going to demand the dot and comma of the Trinity doctrine, and as such it is both claimed, understood and misunderstood very loosely. And many a Unitarian Christian stays clear of the formula, never mind a more pluralist Unitarian or non-Christian Unitarian.

Whilst the New Testament is the story of the earliest Christian communities' interpretations of what they regarded as the Christ event, Unitarians use the writings as a more plural series of arguments around those communities. But Unitarian speculation also extends to what we know is inadequately and mis-represented there - the Jewish Christians and the Gnostics.

Such Unitarian involvement is a different kind of participation: it is a different take on community identity.

So they might want to examine other scriptures and insights also, such as the tension between war and peace and meditative intent in the Bhagavad Gita, or the plainer or more philosophical expositions of spiritual action in Buddhist scriptures. The aim is not to join those faiths, as such, but to be involved imaginatively in their debates and meanings.

We do it both as inheritors and as present day Unitarians. These textual sources are not the possessions of the communities of their apparent submission. They are for everyone. So here comes the main argument.

A useful theology is that of the Roman Catholic, David Tracy. He proposes studying the impact of classics, that is literature that is of such cultural quality that it has the power to impact and transform. Whilst the Bible may still have this, we can easily include other sources.

Nevertheless, the Unitarian is identifying with other Unitarians. This person says, 'I identify with this community through a time that started to evolve its views and reinterpret them. It came to be identified with examining and changing its views. We acquired this self-understanding in

the mid nineteenth century and projected it backwards as a key communal myth. We project it forwards as community identity and method.

So texts become communally Unitarian in how they are used. We must not do violence to them in our reinterpretations. With cultural sensitivity, we have to ask if we know what the original thought processes were, and what can be relevant to today's mode of practical and technological thinking.

This process is known as hermeneutics, and ours is broad and without limits. It's quite difficult grasping even biblical hermeneutics, never mind trying to get a grasp of other sources and then making a case for their relevance and irrelevance.

Being sensitive to something can be accompanied by rejection of it.

The classics are means by which new insights can be found. The classics open up continuing conversations. Unitarian thinking asks if there is something called progressive revelation or perhaps we are humans making up religion as we go along in various cultural packages.

Cultural packages are necessarily collective: they are about an ongoing conversation. I do not mean, here, the postliberal approach of freezing something by which a performance towards an identity is made. I mean a genuine conversation about meaning, and a fidelity to the great sources.

Remember that evolution is always local and specific. Locally it is chaotic: the slightest change can have a huge impact environmentally. Only when things interact do they stabilise into systems.

How do we get to decide changing meanings? By being subjected to the religious presentation through reading and listening and then by participating and responding.

Deciding to respond can be formative in a journey of discernment. It means having a good debate and a good argument: nothing wrong with arguing among friends. Let's be friends and lay your cards on the table.

Part of that discernment is then to be open to the risk of holiness, which itself involves an exposure of just how unholy we can be.

The classics get reaffirmed in the sense that their relevance is still experienced, and we reaffirm our identity with how the community treated them and treats them.

This leads to the notion of transformation - the risk that participation in the classics and in our related activities becomes something that might actually, over time, lead to change. Holiness should, perhaps, lead to more stability; more happiness with confidence about change; coming to terms with death; maximising an inner sense of joy.

There are all sorts of questions here. Is there a God and if so why so invisible? Is there 'real absence' or perhaps 'unreal presence' (rather as in reading a novel - with a purpose but ultimately a fiction). is this God within language still an impact? How can one tell if there is transformation? Perhaps we can only ever tell when there isn't, thus being

another negative in theology applied to the whole purpose of participation.

Forget about priesthood of all believers: or, rather, remember it as once relevant. Think instead of education, or say, specifically, Paulo Freire and building up meaning from below through communities that acquire confidence.

So whilst transformation seems to be about the 'I', surely it is also about a better 'we' - more active discussion and tolerance. 'We' should also mean into action an ethic that, whatever the grounding in community, it means less about 'us' and include more about 'them'. Think of the orchestra and how much more is achieved, through navigating one with the other to gain a broader sound. Think about the listener beyond who is enriched. Transformation is about attitude to one another and the self.

And it's not just about ideas and thoughts that translate into actions: what about starting with actions and ethics and re-working those back into the ideas? Unitarians are often condemned for being busily socially egalitarian and individualist (these being in some conflict - individualism can be so unequal) and yet lacking in directive theology, but it's no crime to start with outcomes and to work back into ideas of the meaning of it all, including God, its absence or presence, and how we understand the contemplation and discernment of worship.

This is critical too: look at the Greggs at Styal in Cheshire, for example (fictionalised in *The Mill* on Channel 4). They trapped and exploited the bonded children (effective slavery until adulthood), so that the children were homesick and even preferred the workhouse, and punishments added to productivity. Yet at the time the Greggs were seen as enlightened and gave facilities to young and old unheard of in

Manchester's slums. The result was attachment to the clock of long hours and physical exhaustion, an average lifespan of some 32 years. What of these economic and religious liberals in the past: is it any wonder that the Labour Movement regarded Unitarian liberalism with suspicion at best? Unitarianism was condemned to be middle class. So often, the Presbyterian Puritans and certain ideological Unitarians amassed incredible wealth and to what end? How do we interpret their moral universe and their motives behind forming charities?

What do we make now of those liberal classics like *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, when liberty for some meant bondage for others? What do we make of the pre-capitalist privileged over-wealthy Merchants that bankroll so many churches to this day? Surely the 'Invisible Hand' was not a metaphor for God but a metaphor for the absence of God.

It sounds rather negative for an attachment! But this is the point: to argue about the past ideas, the literature and indeed have a healthy, ethical, hermeneutics of suspicion with those with whom we identify.

Drawing from the Unitarian tradition is likely to be complex, and potentially unending as one investigates this aspect and then the next. But in the end - like the musician - it is about finding out, using, discarding, being collective and individual, and transforming, moving from phase to phase.

Harrison Birtwistle from Accrington or Steve Reich the American may each of them not sound much like Beethoven, but each is identified with the streams of serious music, and Beethoven in his time was seen as different and

changing. Steve Reich indeed is seen as stretching out boundaries. I have a particular liking for Rick Wakeman.

Here's a thought more troubling, in a sense that of the tragedy of the time, the Unitarian version of 'Christianity as its own gravedigger'. Perhaps Unitarians are now like the Last of the Mohicans (a classic novel and film). We are tiny, battling against the land (secularisation and indifference, and uninvolvedness), involved in clashing cultures, and finding that much that is inherited is out of place in the new broader land of cultural reality. Some are trying to be heroic, some misunderstand, some hide, some are fatalistic. But some work at it well. Inheriting too much, we are trying to tackle this dislocation by change, by being religious hybrids. We become playful, liturgically on the skids, unsure, and there is a sense of the death of our culture and the death of the community and identity. We are the last of the Mohicans in the sense that 50,000 is now, what, maybe 4000 at best? Yet the few that are left are like curators of the identity that is drawn upon, related to, subjected to change in the vast landscape and made into ethical action (along with some unethical action). So we also use the Internet to publish who we are and what it is we were and are becoming. We record what has been and what it has become. Perhaps there will be a full stop, or maybe a few curators will keep arguing and making changes.

So classical literature helps even in the analysing of the communal change. It is a means to understand community, thought, and its application. Through the tradition, and changing it, and rejecting it, one identifies through time, and one acts, and we cease to be individuals and serve a better good.

Adrian Worsfold 23 March 2015

Comments -

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

Please send your comments to the editor,

*Tony McNeile,
102 Turton Rd,
BOLTON.
BL2 3DY*

or email to nuf@nufonline.org.uk

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Articles for the Viewpoint to:

Rev. Tony McNeile
102 Turton Road
BOLTON
BL2 3DY

or

Seeking information about the
National Unitarian Fellowship?

Web site: www.nufonline.org.uk

or

E-mail: nuf@nufonline.org.uk