Unitarian Theology

Conference, Cross Street Chapel,
Manchester May 2016

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Introduction

The idea for a Unitarian Theology Conference arose out of discussions among ministers-in-training and newer ministers, who were all concerned by the lack of serious theological discourse within our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination. It's fair to say we felt frustration over the inability of our faith community to give a coherent answer to such basic questions as: *who are we as a faith community?* and: *what is our purpose?*

Unitarians in the UK were certainly *'doing theology'* all the time – in meetings, talks and services – *but were we doing it well?* (the question posed in the opening lecture by Stephen Lingwood). We feared Unitarian thinking had become superficial and stale, because of its isolation from the Academy (in philosophy and theology) and its lack of engagement with other faiths (including Christianity).

And this was in a denomination with a proud intellectual and scholarly tradition! Yes, we still had historians (as an oft-stated truism put it), but we had no theologians any more. *Really?* It seemed important to try to change this. *But who would do so?*

It was obvious the days of the General Assembly appointing Theological Commissions to investigate and report on the state of our faith (as happened in 1945 and 1959) were gone. We did feel ministers had a particular responsibility here, not least because of our training and role in the movement (although none of us believed theology was the preserve of ministers alone).

So after more than a year of talk, a small group of ministers in the North of England decided to make a start by organising a one-day Unitarian theology conference, to consider key questions confronting us: *Do Unitarians need theology? If so, what is this theology? And how might it develop?*

Things quickly fell into place after this: Cross Street Chapel, in the centre of Manchester, was very happy to host us; finding speakers to tackle the big themes proved not difficult either. The Hibbert Trust generously offered to help with costs, and UKUnitarianTV were keen to film the conference. My own ministry, the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry, allowed me time to act as organiser.

Our four speakers were: Stephen Lingwood, Dr Melanie Prideaux,

Rev Jo James and Rev Dr David Steers, and they all produced high-quality lectures. (Sadly, David Steers was ill and could not attend – his paper was read instead by the Conference chairman, Jim Corrigall). We arranged for a Panel to lead discussion after the presentations, and were most fortunate to have here: three ministers Rev Sarah Tinker, Rev Sheena Gabriel and Rev Lewis Connolly.

We were surprised and delighted by the response from the denomination. Between 80 and 90 people from the length and breadth of Britain attended, demonstrating a widely felt need for theology. The minister at Cross St Chapel, Rev Cody Coyne, set a beautiful tone for the day with his opening devotions, and a good spirit prevailed throughout. The audience participated enthusiastically in the (admittedly far-too-short) periods for wider discussion.

A sheet for 'feedback' was given out during the day, and returns were reasonably high. Comments were very largely positive – and those that were not, highlighted genuine problems – mainly that there were rather too many long lectures for one day, and that more interaction would have helped.

Several attenders stated they would like more theology conferences in future! That is certainly our intention. We regard this conference as the start of a process … one which we hope will contribute to the intellectual, theological and spiritual renewal of the Unitarian and Free Christian denomination in the UK.

Jim Corrigall
Chairman, Unitarian Theology Conference, Manchester, 2016.

Note:
The four conference lectures are all now available to view as high-quality videos on the UKUnitarianTV website, by clicking on the 'Theology Conference' button. The website address is: www.ukunitarian.tv

Some Foundations for Unitarian Theology

STEPHEN LINGWOOD

Part One: Understanding "Theology"

Why is theology important?

Imagine this scenario: you are a member of a congregational committee and I bring this proposal to the committee: I want to turn our church into a nightclub. What do you think? Is that okay?

I have some good practical arguments for doing so. It will bring many more people through the door. Instead of 35 people on a Sunday morning we could probably get 1000 in every Saturday night. So it seems that it will be good for growth. It will make a lot more money than we're making right now. So it makes a lot of financial sense. So, why not?

I expect if we were to think about this for long enough we would come to the conclusion that we would lose something of the *essence* or *purpose* of the church if we turned it into a nightclub. Whatever it would be, it would no longer be a church, it would no longer be a Unitarian community. But what is that essence or purpose? How do we define it and how does our understanding of it shape our decisions?

When we ask these kinds of questions we are doing *theology*. Theology is the process that enables us to think about what the purpose of a church might be and to discern whether turning one into a nightclub is consistent or not with that purpose.

We do theology all the time. We do theology at every congregational committee meeting. Every preacher does theology when they create a sermon. We do theology when we write a slogan on our noticeboard or our website.

But this is surface-level theology. It might be based on gut-level instincts that remain assumed and unexamined. It may be based on any number of assumptions or unexamined "orthodoxies." It may be based on simply repeating the things of the past in a parrot-like way. It may be

full of all kinds of contradictions or falsehoods that do not stand up to scrutiny. Theology in a more thorough (and academic) manner asks all these questions, and keeps asking them "as far down as they go". That is the sort of theology we're trying to do today. And this is the sort of theology we need to do if we want our faith life to be coherent, consistent and truthful.

What is theology?

So, I now want to go a bit deeper into what theology really is. In this my understanding is shaped largely by the German American twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich. Theology is the process of systematically analysing, and creatively reinterpreting, *faith*. When I use the term "faith" I mean what Tillich calls "ultimate concern."[1] The theologian and psychologist James Fowler, himself influenced by Tillich, wrote, "Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him - or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."[2] This understanding of faith includes traditional "religious" faith but is not limited to it.

Theology reflects on faith. And theology reflects on faith *from within faith*. Theology operates from *within* the ultimate concern. It does not claim to be "objective." This method is so alien to the modern approach to "science" that it can sometimes mean that theology is seen as an unworthy academic discipline. Tillich explained, "the philosopher tries to maintain a detached objectivity toward being and its structures. He tries to exclude the personal, social and historical conditions which might distort an objective vision of reality... The theologian, quite differently, is not detached from his object but is involved in it. He looks at his object (which transcends the character of being an object) with passion, fear and love. This is not the *eros* of the philosopher or his passion for objective truth; it is the love which accepts saving, and therefore personal, truth. The basic attitude of the theologian is commitment to the content he expounds. Detachment would be a denial of the very nature of this content. The attitude of the theologian is 'existential.'... The theologian, in short, is determined by his faith."[3]

Does that mean theology is purely subjective or that it wallows in an idiosyncratic subjectivity? Or that it simply expounds the "truths" of the faith without any recourse to challenge, simply regurgitating the orthodoxy of the ancestors? My answer is no. Theology is a more complex endeavour than either of these views.

The nearest analogy I can come up with is that of architecture. Architecture involves an understanding of the truths of physics, an appreciation of the art of form, and the commitment to create buildings. The commitment to a certain style or school of art, the commitment that certain forms are beautiful, may be a subjective commitment. The understanding of gravity, however, is objective and essential if you're going to design a building that will not fall down. And the end point is not to just *appreciate* good buildings, but to create them yourself.

Similarly theology may be committed to a certain form of faith, and that commitment may be subjective (although that is a big issue we don't have time for here). Nevertheless there are truths with which theology needs to be consistent. Theology needs to have an internal logical consistency, needs to be consistent with (not contradicting) philosophical, scientific and psychological truths. And in the end theology is not concerned to simply *describe* (religious) faith. Rather theology is committed to *doing* faith, *creating* faith.

In that sense theology is more of an applied, than a pure, science. In a methodological sense it has more in common with art, architecture, music and engineering than philosophy, physics, history or even religious studies. It is not content to only describe something. It also wants to *do* something.

This leads us to another important thing about theology. Theology, by definition, cannot remain in the academy but must live and find expression in the liturgical, spiritual, and pastoral life of the faith community. This is a point often ignored by theologians, leading to the gap between the theology of the academy and the theology of the local faith community. But I would suggest that if a theology never lives or finds expression in the local community then it has stopped with the job half-done.

This, I would suggest, is a large part of why movements of liberal theology have largely failed. It is because the theology has rarely been translated into liturgy. So for example, if our theology says "God is beyond gender, neither male nor female" but the local church still sings "dear Lord and Father of mankind" then the living theology of the church remains that God is male, even if the "official" or academic theology is that God is beyond gender. I would suggest that liberals have been too pliant in this sort of thing, saying "Oh never mind, it's all a metaphor anyway" and then tolerating illiberal liturgy. If the theology of our liturgy and hymnody remains conservative, then the task of liberal theology is incomplete.

Our theology needs to lead back into lived faith, into liturgy and praxis, which should then feedback into theology in a continuing dialogue. Theology needs to "work" in prayer, poetry and song. Again often liberal theology is very poor at this. It might seem to make sense to speak of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" but try singing it and it's excruciatingly awful. The wordiness of a lot of official liberal denominational statements and liturgy (particularly in Unitarianism) often fails this test of liturgical beauty that enriches the life of faith.

Equally the theology of the faith community should not be divorced from the academy. One of the great failings of contemporary British Unitarianism is its wilful ignorance of the theology of the academy. We can still believe our ideas are "cutting edge" or "radical" when the problems with our ideas have been pointed out in the academy more than a century ago. If we truly value truth, reason and free inquiry, then we should not ignore academic philosophy or theology.

Part Two: Understanding "Unitarian"

An initial definition of Unitarianism

So having very briefly said something about the nature of theology, I now want to explore what we mean when we use the word "Unitarian." This is not a simple task, as there's all kinds of cul-de-sacs we could get lost down at this point.

Knowing that we are heading towards wanting to say something about "Unitarian theology" we have to assume that "Unitarian" has some meaning to do with faith. We could say that there is a thing called "Unitarian faith" and that Unitarian theology is the exploration and exposition of this. But this is jumping ahead.

A better starting point is to have a common sense definition of Unitarianism as the religious communities that have been connected with the word "Unitarian" on these islands (while also acknowledging some important connections with those who also use that word in other places around the world).

But as soon as we do that we immediately come up with a problem. That problem is those communities have often be very reluctant to name themselves with that word "Unitarian" and have sometimes distanced themselves from it. Historically some have argued for the word

"Unitarian" as referring to a personal opinion about the nature of God, rather than as referring to a community, and the many things for which that community stands. So James Martineau considered himself to be "Unitarian" but didn't want to serve a church that called itself "Unitarian."[4] Martineau's objection is, I think, answered well by Raymond Holt when he wrote, "Many Unitarians dislike the word Unitarian because it seems to them to emphasise a particular doctrine rather than a spirit. They forget that the significance of a word is given by its life history not by its etymology or by the definitions that compilers of dictionaries try to impose upon them."[5]

I think this is really important in avoiding a cul-de-sac in our journey today. I am not defining "Unitarian" in a narrow etymological sense. And I believe we should not define "Unitarian" in such a narrow way. The word "Unitarian" does not just mean the doctrine of the uni-personality of God. Many religious communities would hold to this doctrine, and they are not Unitarians. For Unitarians the Unity of God (or anti-Trinitarianism) has always been one theological commitment within an ecology of a number of evolving theological commitments. I do not think it is irrelevant, but neither is it sufficient *by itself* in defining the Unitarian tradition.

The opposite danger is in defining Unitarianism too broadly. Although I have so far defined Unitarianism as the religious community connected to that name, it is not good enough to just leave it there. If we just left it there then anything and everything could be represented and practised under the label "Unitarian" and if that were the case then a Unitarian theology would certainly not be possible. "Unitarian" would cease to have any theological or philosophical or existential meaning whatsoever. It would mean everything and nothing.

To be able to do Unitarian theology I believe it is necessary for us to make the affirmation that Unitarianism is a *faith tradition*. Let's examine each of these words in turn.

Faith

It's interesting that a vision process undertaken by the Unitarian General Assembly recently came up with the statement "we want to be a faith that matters."[6] The words "that matters" in this context is a tautology, as faith, by definition, must matter. Faith, in the existential sense of Tillich and Fowler, is the ultimate orientation for a person's life. But it is worth us going much more deeply into the claim that Unitarianism might be a faith. To claim that Unitarianism *is a faith* is not a simple matter.

There is an ambiguity in our language here. Are we saying that *we are* a faith or that *we have* faith? Although it may not be very easy to always make this distinction in everyday language it is worth considering what the difference might be.

I would argue that more than *being a faith*, we need to be a tradition that *has faith*. Although it makes sense in the common usage of English the problem with "being a faith" is that it suggests our ultimate concern is the institution. It suggests that we give our hearts to (ultimately would be prepared to die for) a human institution. This is the promotion of what Tillich calls "a preliminary concern" to the status of ultimate concern; and Tillich is right to call this idolatry. It is idolatrous to promote the institution to the level of ultimate concern, the level of faith.[7]

This, I would suggest, is why our attempts at "evangelism" - at promoting ourselves - can feel clumsy and inauthentic. Because we know that "Unitarianism" or "the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches" is not a faith - it is not something worth living for and dying for.

We only need to look to other traditions to see the difference here. Faith traditions do not evangelise the tradition, they evangelise the faith. Christians do not promote "Christianity", they promote "Jesus", or "God", or "the gospel", or "the kingdom." Muslims do not promote "Islam" they promote "God" or "God's final message." Buddhist do not promote "Buddhism" they promote "the dharma of the Buddha that leads to enlightenment."

If our vision is "to be a faith" then we will fail because we already know in our bones that the institution is not an ultimate concern. The human institution is not capable of giving ultimate meaning to our lives. It is not worth dying for. But the human institution can point to something that can give us ultimate meaning in our lives. We fail at *being* a faith but we can *point* to faith. We can have faith.

However the problem with "having faith" is that an objection could be made that this is not what Unitarianism is about. There is an an argument that Unitarianism is a "blank space" within which it is possible to do faith (and conversely possible not to). This has become the pervasive model in modern British Unitarianism. In some ways it has become a "new orthodoxy" that is uncritically accepted as the naturally logical and moral position. In such an understanding a Unitarian community is space in which people are united by values and principles but entirely neutral in matters of faith. This is a pragmatic position that

has evolved to accommodate increased theological pluralism by negating theology and faith to the entirely personal realm.

The problems with this position are manifold. Philosophically it stands on very shaky ground in uncritically taking on modern (or post-modern) atomistic individualism. It claims that a religion can be based on principles and values rather than stories, practices and a shared orientation towards ultimate concern. All of these assumptions are very questionable.

Additionally I would maintain the "blank space" individualistic approach does not work liturgically, pastorally, spiritually, or psychologically. To maintain "neutrality" the real substance of faith must be negated to the non-essential. To remain "neutral" sermons must be about matters of principles and politics, or twee wisdom and pleasantries but cannot advocate for the transforming, sustaining realities of faith. In short, the community ceases to be interested in ultimate concern and busies itself in matters of preliminary concern.

To come to this position, when ultimate concern no longer concerns us, is to becoming something other than a faith tradition, something other than religion, something other than church.

Tradition

Faith is something that is personal, giving meaning and purpose to individual human lives. But it can only exist because a historical community (or tradition) has handed the faith to the individual. This is true whether the historical community is explicit and defined by regular meeting and practice or from a continuity of ideas and writings or more generally through a dispersed set of ideas in the culture. Faith, along with all human products, can only exist because it has a historical cultural rootedness. It has come from somewhere.

Unitarians are largely unreconstructed Enlightenment thinkers, and our greatest philosophical error is failing to truly appreciating this truth about tradition. Many of us have still not taken on the basic philosophical truth that *all truth is contextual*. Philosophy and theology have been wrestling with this understanding for centuries, but Unitarians are often still operating in a way that is much too rooted in a 200-year-old Enlightenment attitude that fails to see context as inescapable.

Take this statement from a Unitarian community, that claims to operate "without the limitations or language that is based in specific

cultures, ethnicities, or religions." This is a factually impossible statement. *All language* is based on specific cultures. Language is a product of culture. If I say the word "God" I am bringing in a whole history of ideas that lays behind this word. But I am doing so no less if I use the word "Truth" or if I use the word "Good." The word "Good" is no less of a culturally-conditioned concept than the word "God." Every single word I could possibly use comes through a specific history of language and culture. We cannot escape the historically-conditioned nature of all human existence.

One of the greatest fallacies in today's Unitarian community is that *specificity is immoral*. We think the only way to be inclusive and moral and liberal is to *deny specificity*. The problem with this is that it is impossible. If we are operating in the English language we are operating within a limited understanding through a specific culture and history that we cannot escape. And this true of every language.

What the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued about morality can equally be said about theology and religion: "morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion; and… that there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherent them and our understanding of them."[8]

In a similar vein James Luther Adams wrote that we must "deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation."[9] Again, Adams wrote, "We need to strike root into a definite plot of soil. We need somehow to find our place in a continuing and promising tradition with its sacred books, its communion of saints and its disciples... In the church we accept the truth: *By their fruits you shall know them*. But we also accept the truth: *By their roots you shall know them*. Where there are no roots, there will be no fruits."[10]

It was suggested to us as organisers of this conference that this should be an interfaith conference. I say very firmly that it most definitely should not be. Firstly because there's a lot of interfaith conferences already and we'd be a poor version of those. And secondly because it would be an escape from the hard work of thinking about our own specificity. We don't understand the world by leaping straight to the universal. We must live in the particular and understand that more deeply.

Specificity is not immoral. Specificity is not only inescapable but necessary and useful in order to do the work of faith, morality and religion. There is no way to do faith apart from within a tradition of faith.

Part Three: Some Unitarian Theological Claims

Having explored the meaning of "theology" and the meaning of "Unitarian" perhaps it is now time to *do* some Unitarian theology. The scope of this talk is not to give a complete systematic Unitarian theology. My task here has been more methodological and critical rather than creative and constructive. I am seeking to clear some space, to lay down some foundations and boundaries for what any Unitarian theology might look like. Nevertheless it is at this point where we can say we are beginning to really do Unitarian theology.

The Unitarian tradition makes theological claims. These claims are distinctive and different, even contradictory, to other faith traditions. We may sometimes shy away from this truth, but to shy away from making a theological claim is in itself making a theological claim. It is better to be truthful about this rather than having a pretence to a falsely neutral position.

Today I want to limit myself to two theological commitments for Unitarianism. These do not define the whole of Unitarian faith and theology but they do lay down some vital foundations. At this point I am engaging in a creative and constructive task of articulating Unitarian faith and theology. I am attempting to articulate and make explicit what I believe has been implicit in the Unitarian tradition, although there is not space here to fully explore the all historical sources of this claim.

Unitarian faith is committed to the intimacy and immediacy of the Holy.

Unitarian faith is faith in the goodness, meaningfulness, beauty and holiness of life. Unitarian faith claims that life is a blessing and not a curse; that there is a beauty and holiness that surrounds us; that our purpose is not to escape this existence, but live in it more deeply; that we are intimately connected to a holiness that binds us all together; even that this holiness is a loving reality that inspires us to love.[11]

This faith is only implicit when Unitarians emphasis the rational and practical aspects of the religious life, but becomes more explicit in the Unitarian mystical tradition. Unitarian spirituality has been characterised by a more immanent than transcendent spirituality. As far back as the proto-Unitarian Michael Servetus[12], and finding its full flourishing in the Transcendental movement in the United Sates and the spirituality of Martineau[13] in Britain, we can see this insistence to look within and to the here and now. As Emerson wrote, "the Highest dwells within us.... As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the

infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins."[14] Although tradition is essential to the religious life, we should not put our faith in the past, or in the future. Unitarianism refuses to be a religion that says "God *did* this" or "God *will do* that" but always asks, "What *is* God *doing* right here and right now?" Our attention is not given to the afterlife or some eschatological future but to the now. This we share with the Quakers, and to some extent with the Pentecostals.

This also gives the theological foundation for our anti-Trinitarianism. To say "God entered history in the person of Jesus Christ" suggests God's *absence* for the rest of history, including today. The Unitarian faith denies this absence.

The Unitarian faith sees this world as ultimately good, blessed, beautiful, filled with the presence of the Holy, even as a Paradise (although we often abuse and distort this)[15] and intimately inter-connected. The deep connection we have with the Holy and with all that is provides a foundation for our spirituality, morality and politics. Human beings are inherently holy and ontologically equal with one another. The human race is one.

A challenging question at this point might well be "what is the Holy?" I have even used the word "God" - is "the Holy" another name for God? Well the first thing to say at this point is that the Holy can never be fully described or defined. Some may think this is an avoidance of the question, but it is a clear Unitarian theological claim that the Holy cannot be named, confined, or fully described in language.

The Holy is immediate, intimate, and universally present. This the Unitarian tradition claims. What is less certain is whether this leads us to a pantheism/religious naturalism or to a theism that is panentheistic. In other words there is a legitimate question about whether the Christian language of God is still sufficient for describing or practising this theology or whether some form of religious humanist/naturalist language is more appropriate. I do not intend today to settle that question, but I do want to insist that both positions are rooted in a *shared* theological commitment to the immediacy of the Holy.[16]

Unitarian faith is committed to the ever-unfolding nature of truth

The Unitarian tradition affirms that revelation is continuous and accessible to the individual.[17] The commitment to the authority of reason and conscience is founded on this view.[18] Andrew Hill expresses this in this way, "Our understanding of the Truth is a continuously growing

process by which reality slowly discloses its essential nature in response to human effort."[19]

As James Luther Adams wrote, "Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous. Meaning it has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism."[20] This can be viewed as an extension of the Protestant suspicion of idolatry.[21] The Holy is beyond comprehension, therefore it is an act of idolatry for one person or book or institution to be viewed as divinely instituted, this is to make these things into God, or God's exclusive representative.[22] All our theological talk is provisional and contextual.[23]

This is the theological foundation for our commitment to creedlessness. Revelation is continuous.[24] The Holy cannot be contained in a human formulation of language and our understanding of the Holy is continuously evolving. So for Unitarians, a creed would fossilise a continuing and dynamic process. It is important to realise though, that creedlessness is not an anti-theological commitment. In fact the opposite is true. Creedlessness is an outworking of our theology of revelation and a commitment to continue to do theology in seeking to expand our understanding of truth.

Closing Comments

I have opened a lot of doors today that we've peered through, but there has not been time to go through each door and explore the landscape there. All the points I have made could be explored in a lot more detail. Unfortunately time has been limited.

But to summarise I have argued that we do theology all the time, but not necessarily well. If we are a faith community that values truth and free inquiry we should practice theology more systematically and thoroughly, bringing the academy and the local faith community into dynamic dialogue.

I have argued that Unitarianism is a faith tradition: that it points to a particular way of making meaning and being human and that it is a historically-rooted human tradition. As a faith tradition it makes historically-conditioned theological claims. Although we recognise the provisional nature of such theological claims, that doesn't mean we should reject the very concept of a theological claim and seek a general "universalism" that claims to break out of historically-conditioned existence. This is impossible.

Unitarian faith makes theological claims that include the immediacy of the Holy and the ever-unfolding nature of truth. These provide foundations for many of the the other commitments and practices of the Unitarian community.

I hope that in laying down these foundations I have provided some stimulus for Unitarians to do the work of theology that is so desperately needed. We are a liberal and creedless tradition, and so can never accept formal and final statements of our theology. But this can no longer be an excuse to be entirely vague and unclear about our identity. In the noisy postmodern world we need to be able to speak clearly of who we are, and we cannot do that without doing the hard work of theology.

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[1] “The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us.” Tillich, 12.

[2] Fowler, 4.

[3] Tillich, 22-23

[4] Webb, 21.

[5] Holt, 14.

[6] Annual Report of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2015, 6

[7] Existentially idolatry is making something penultimate into something ultimate. See Tillich, 13

[8] MacIntyre, 126-127.

[9] Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, 17.

[10] Beach, 250. Emphasis original.

[11] After referencing mystical experiences of Wordsworth and J. E. Carpenter, the Unitarian report, *A Free Religious Faith* (1945) expresses the commitment that these experiences "justify the interpretation of the universe as a spiritual reality and even point to the existence of personality in God." 18.

[12] "His spirit from the beginning has been placed in us and has later been poured again into us abundantly." Servetus, 180

[13] "The life with God then, of which saintly men in every age have testified, is no illusion of enthusiasm, but an ascent, through simple surrender, to the higher vision of the soul, the very watchtower whence there is the clearest and largest view. The bridge is thus complete between the Divine and the human personality; and we crown the religion of Causation, the religion of Conscience, by the religion of the Spirit." James Martineau, "Three Stages of Unitarian Theology" (1869) 75 – 76.

[14] Emerson, "The Oversoul" in *Singing The Living Tradition*, reading 531.

[15] See Nakashima Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*. This largely historical survey, co-authored by a Unitarian Universalist (Parker), opens the possibility of a constructive Unitarian theology based on the image of Paradise as a root-metaphor for salvation.

[16] Spinoza's phrase "*Deus sive natura*" points to the shared root of the two concepts. As Tillich wrote, "the very fact that the words "God" and "nature" can be used interchangeably reveals the religious background of monistic naturalism." 232.

[17] This is also related to a this-worldly, immanent more than transcendent, spirituality. See Hostler, 63 - 64

[18] An emphasis first articulated fully by James Martineau, see Schulman, 77-81 and Hall, 92 - 94. See also Hostler, 11, 43-44.

[19] Hill, 10.

[20] Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, 12

[21] According to Cathal Courtney, believing in the inerrant authority of either scripture or tradition "both come close to constituting acts of idolatry given that they place a collection of words before the force and power of love which most of them claim they are trying to promote." 76

[22] Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 48.

[23] Saxbee, 22. See also Wiles, 64 - 65

[24] John Hostler writes, "[the view that creeds are unnecessary] carries with it wide implications – far wider indeed than most Unitarians themselves are want to recognise. To abandon all professions of doctrine as they have done inevitably demands an exceptional willingness to accept changes in belief. The traditional use of a creed is intimately linked with the notion that God has made an initial declaration of his [sic] truth, and that it is the business of the church to preach this revelation and to hand it on unchanged and uncorrupted from one generation to the next… But this historical picture of revelation is wholly inconsistent with the ideal of religious freedom. Rejecting the use of creeds and confessions manifestly implies that God's message to man [sic] is not to be enshrined in such static formulae of belief but ought rather to be expressed in different ways by different people. It requires revelation to be thought of not as a written statement by God but as a spiritual insight by man [sic]; not as a public declaration made once for all, but as a private intuition which each man [sic] can properly understand and express in his [sic] own way in order to extract its full meaning within the context of his [sic] experience and concerns." Hostler, 24-25.

Response to Stephen Lingwood

MELANIE PRIDEAUX

I am flattered to have been asked to respond to Stephen's paper, and I wish to offer some comments, largely framed as questions, which I hope may prompt further debate on what I am sure we all agree is an interesting opportunity for a more robust discussion of Unitarian theology.

When I was invited to respond I felt the need to ask 'You do know I'm not a theologian, don't you?' I would describe myself as working in the broad field of Religious Studies, but I do engage with theology both in my research and in my teaching. Although the relationship between theology and religious studies can lead to rather heated debate, unlike Stephen I do not perceive a necessary division between theology and religious studies and so my academic background necessarily informs my thoughts about Unitarian theology[1]. As a Unitarian, I have been saying for some time that we could be doing theology better and more visibly – and that from doing so, everything from our ministry training to our institutional governance, and even our ability to grow, might naturally evolve. What I have to say is informed therefore by my academic background as well as my Unitarian belonging.

Stephen has opened up some interesting territory to guide a developing Unitarian theology and I hope this conference can act as a springboard for further discussion and development.

So I am going to start by asking you to reflect on what, as you read Stephen's paper, you particularly noted. Did you pick up on the issue about liturgy? About the General Assembly and its identity statements? Did you find Stephen's two theological points – about the 'immediacy of the Holy and the ever-unfolding nature of truth' challenging, or natural? Did you stumble at questions about whether God is the right word, did you take a breath when Stephen pointed out our affinity with Pentecostals?

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[1] There is an extensive debate in the field of religious studies about what it means to be an 'insider' or an 'outsider' which is relevant here – and to some extent throughout this discussion. Knott (2005) gives a good overview of the issues involved.

The reason I ask this, is because it strikes me that what Stephen has said is essential, grounded, logically coherent, faithful, and also incredibly likely in places to 'put people's backs up'! Indeed, it seems any attempt to have a conversation about theology at a denominational level runs the risk of 'putting people's back up', as social media has often demonstrated. I find that interesting. In other denominations conversations about theology happen all the time, with greater or lesser degrees of disagreement and debate. It does make me want to ask whether, in our desire to be creedless we might have thrown the theological baby out with the bathwater. Discussing theology doesn't require the imposition of creeds of course, but it is revealing that in Unitarianism people think it might do. It strikes me that this may point to some deeper issues with what we think religion, and therefore theology, 'is'.

As well as what theology is, and why it is perceived as a risky activity in Unitarianism, I think there are also some interesting questions about who does theology. Stephen points out that we do 'it' all the time, but he draws our attention to the depth at which this reflection happens. To some extent this must be what we expect our religious professionals to do – to be doing this work of developing, articulating and challenging theologies. This does not mean, however, that I necessarily think this work of theology should be, can be, or is the work of experts separate from the lived realities of Unitarian communities.

With these thoughts in mind I'd like to articulate two points in response to Stephen's paper, the first about theological form, the second about context. I offer these as observations in the spirit of dialogue and with no pretence that I am either a theologian or a religious professional!

Unitarian Theological Form

Anselm described theology as 'Faith seeking understanding' and Stephen is broadly speaking from within systematic Christian theology as a particular means of doing this. Although systematic theology provides an important basis for reflection, there has been a proliferation of theological approaches over the past twenty or more years which might in fact be more fertile ground for informing a framework for Unitarian theological discourse. My doctoral students are working with the tools of public theology, political and practical theology and it surprises me that we aren't more actively involved in some of the discussions in these contemporary areas of theology. I am often struck, when looking at material in this field, that maybe we'd be surprised to find we're really not as radical, or as different, as we think we are.

One approach which seems particularly interesting, and relevant to my opening reflections, is that of Ordinary Theology which Astley (2002:1) describes as 'the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education. However, these reflections need not be limited to the individual and Cartledge (2010) sees a key outcome of the process of the analysis of ordinary theology and suggesting changes to church practice.

This is an approach which fascinates me because it is concerned with making sense of demotic (of the people) theology – of the theology of the pews which is a particular interest in my own research. How do people in churches exercise theological reflection, what informs their process of 'seeking understanding'? I think this is interesting because it fits so well with the particularly Unitarian way of thinking about revelation that Stephen has drawn our attention to. We are all part of the out-working of revelation, we all participate and experience it, so listening to the voices of everyone is itself a potentially powerful theological tool.

I also find an interesting resonance between the work of Ordinary Theology and the Lived Religion approach in religious studies. Although broadly the way of understanding religion which anthropology has long worked with, the approach has most recently popularised by McGuire. She describes religion as 'an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices' (2008:4). It strikes me that in Unitarian congregations we have often been providing a structure for how anthropologists and sociologists note that religion in any context 'naturally' evolves and is expressed. Individuals make sense of the world by an aesthetic, personal, sometimes communal shifting between experiences and ideas which do spiritual 'work' for them in some sense and at some point. People hybridise beliefs, practices and belonging in virtually all religious communities but unusually Unitarianism provides a context for this as a valid and conscious process. I think this is something we could really put some thought into.

Attention then to Ordinary Theology or Lived Religion, to how Unitarians actually ***do*** this thing called church and what they believe about what they do, can potentially be brought into a creative dialogue with more systematic theological accounts which might underlie, inform or challenge us. I don't therefore consider that we necessarily need to position Unitarian theology within the traditional bounds of existing Christian theological forms, nor that there is such a distance between theology and religious studies, but I do consider that we should look to

the contemporary work that is already happening in theology and religious studies and which speaks to our experience as church.

This brings me on to a related observation on Stephen's piece and about theological form: What is it that gives our theological reflection, whether in the congregations or in the academy, authority? Christian theology is not static, and nor is *kalam* or Buddhist philosophy. They all move with time and context, but importantly there are accepted points of authority within the traditions to which those accounts of theology can refer. There are texts (sacred texts or rule books) or individuals (priests of various types) invested with meaning and authority in a variety of different ways by the traditions which make reference to them.

We do not have a shared central source of authority, and unlike our Quaker cousins we haven't come up with an effective means of discerning shared authority which, I have argued, is key to how our theology might evolve and develop. This is a good example where theology goes right to the heart of institutional practice. I put it to you that there is no theological or religious rationale for how we make decisions about how we govern ourselves and that this appears a peculiar omission for an organisation which claims to be a religion.

What is the theological rationale for the local congregation as the main organisational structure? For who votes in General Assembly meetings? For what issues are discussed? For who sets the agenda? For where we meet? For how decisions are acted upon in congregations? I would suggest there are such rationales but they are implicit and thus open to abuse. To echo Stephen's opening analogy of the night club church – what if those people who vote at the GA meetings were won over by a particularly impressive bit of oratory and passed a motion which most Unitarians considered unethical? OK, we'd just ignore it (and that in itself tells us a lot!), but the point is we don't have authority except through structures which are not of themselves religiously informed. The authority of individual conscience is a fine thing, and a principle which we must cherish – but it doesn't necessarily make for effective community organising in any context and particularly not in churches.

This work to articulate a shared sense of authority might take us in all number of directions but I'd humbly suggest it may be work that our tradition needs. Interestingly, the Hibbert Trust has recently part funded a piece of Quaker academic work on the Quaker 'threshing' decision making process (Muers and Grant, 2016). I'd love to see us making use of such discussions in other traditions. We don't have to reinvent the wheel.

I've suggested that the work of Unitarian theology might be creatively informed by a range of approaches in theology and religious studies, with those focussed on individual 'meaning making' being as potentially useful as the more traditional forms. I've also moved from this to noting challenges in how we articulate authority in order to discern good/strong/healthy Unitarian theological reasoning. I'd now like to move on to think about context – and particularly the secular – as a way of further responding to Stephen's paper.

Unitarian Theology and the Secular

My second observation arising from Stephen's account is that I think we are insufficiently attuned to how secularism as ideology and secularisation as process has shaped the way we talk about our tradition, and how our current inattention to theology might itself be leading to our demise.

The research on non-religion, religious 'nones' and the secular is extensive and growing. A piece I've co-written with a former student will add to this literature and is about the Sunday Assembly. One of the features my co-author noted in the course of his fieldwork was that the Sunday Assembly was articulating its identity through expressions of moral community as a form of 'secular sacred' (Knott 2013) and not in ***opposition to*** religion, but ***inclusive of*** religion. As a Unitarian it strikes me as revealing that the Sunday Assembly holds appeal for many of us. I am moved to consider whether the Sunday Assembly is the logical 21st century outworking of some of the theological forms of universalism that our Unitarian forebears left us with, and whether in this sense we need to reconsider our history and heritage.

Unitarianism may be a 'feather-bed for falling Christians' but it may also be a way marker for the demise of religion in Western society. Protestantism has been identified throughout the work on secularisation theory, and most notably in the work of Max Weber, as pivotal in the increased privatisation of religion, the separation of church and state, and thus in various ways to the decline of religion. Unitarianism is to some extent the apogee of Protestant thinking. Our secular context is part of our religious identity.

There are other senses in which secularisation theory speaks to our condition and might usefully be brought into our theological discussions. Hervieu-Leger (2000) identified the way in which secularisation was a result of the failure of the 'chain of memory', as a result of the dislocation of communities of faith. I'd like to suggest that what Stephen has identified in his piece – unintentionally – is that we

have a very limited theological chain of memory. We refer back to Martineau, or Adams, without stopping off in between to ask how we got from there to here, and whether the place we have got to (an absence of shared theological discussion) is where we want to be, or where our predecessors thought we would be.

As individuals we step into our community with a relatively limited set of tools to help us establish links in the chain of memory. We don't have a set of resources which link us to our past or our future that are entirely our own – instead we take resources from all over the religious world but, importantly, we don't ***own*** our magpie tendencies sufficiently to give an account which is particular to us. It isn't really surprising this broken chain of memory has occurred. We reinvent how we express our communal identity with alarming regularity (I'd suggest we do so generationally) and with varyingly effective levels of theological coherence as Stephen has highlighted.

Without this chain of memory about who we are, and the authority it would lend our endeavours, what precisely do we do if some among us wish to see us as a Sunday Assembly with our own buildings? Our lack of a theological account of who we are does not protect us from the effects of secularisation, it increases the threat secularisation poses to us. Yet it need not be this way. We could be speaking to the condition of religion in the 21st century West much more effectively - based on our history but also, importantly, based on the lived experience of messy creedless religion with which people do theological work all the time.

Our secular context then is not just something we must grapple with as an external force but something we have to articulate as part of our own religious identity, whether we see it as a positive social development or not. I see this as another potentially fruitful point where religious studies might usefully inform our theological discussions. If we start thinking and talking more about what it is we do, and how to articulate that beyond the sometimes strained notions of liberalism that we rely on, we might find both greater depth to our thinking and a greater sense of belonging.

Stephen's paper, and this conference, is an important opportunity for us to stop and ask what it is we think we are doing. Not all of the work Stephen has highlighted, can be achieved any time soon, but I hope I've outlined some of the reasons why I think the work needs doing, and some of the further complexity we might need to engage with. If we do not engage with this knotty work of establishing a theologically coherent way of discussing who we are, of developing a shared sense of authority, of asking the difficult questions and

challenging the accepted forms of our tradition, then I think we are failing to live up to those key features of Unitarian theology that Stephen articulated as the ‘immediacy of the Holy and the ever-unfolding nature of truth’, which I’d be surprised if any of us disagreed with.

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Unitarian theologies of the Spirit

JO JAMES

A sense of the Holy Spirit as a 'fugitive doctrine' which evades definition is characteristic of much pneumatology. According to Veli Matti Karkkainnen Pneumatology may be most reliably established with reference to textual sources, tradition, experience and practice (Karkkainnen, 2002, p.16) and these are the points of reference I have found it most useful to rely on.

Since its first publication in 1947, *Faith and Freedom* has described the trajectory of post war Unitarian academic and theological thought. While the predominant aspect of this thought is rationalistic, humanistic and sceptical, a brief scrutiny reveals that pneumatology has been a sustained subject of enquiry, with articles on the topic appearing with regularity throughout its publication.

In a 2001 essay, editor Rev David Steers listed five key ways in which the Holy Spirit can be recognised as acting within the development of liberal Christianity;

By emphasis on reason in faith;
By an open and thoughtful approach to the Bible;
Through a preference for unity and dialogue;
By individual responsibility for faith; and
By an insistence on religious tolerance and freedom of conscience.

A rationalistic outlook has come to characterise the Unitarian story of itself, and historians like John Seed have pointed out that narrative is key to understanding the Dissenting tradition (2008). However it is also possible to view from another perspective investigating lateral points of contact networks and interrelationships between concurrent theological strands.

Recent denominational historians have tended to emphasise Anglican and Presbyterian genealogy as though these were the only traditions to which we can validly claim affinity - and I wonder why this should be so? Perhaps there are unacknowledged theological commitments which are served by claiming that there is nothing in our Christian heritage worthy of our sustained attention beyond stolid Presbyterianism and worthy Anglicanism?

The idea of the immanent Spirit perceived as the active principle of

God working through human affairs clearly has theological implications for a denominational stance on human justice and equality. G.W.H. Lampe in his Bampton Lecture *God as Spirit* (1976 p.182) describes "the fruit of the Spirit … as the form which love and freedom take when they are translated into terms of social ethics…".

Some Unitarians have expressed doubt that pneumatology is a valid subject for investigation in a Unitarian context. However I follow Alastair McIntosh, who, defending 'Celtic spirituality' against 'Celto-sceptics' claimed that the issue is not whether ... "Celtic spirituality ever existed, but that a living spirituality … manifestly can and does exist" (2004, p.19).

Certainly a consideration of the manifold ways in which the theology of Unitarianism has been influenced, including its development from Anabaptist, pietist and puritan mystical and spiritual traditions are common to the work of earlier Unitarian scholars including Bonet-Maury (1884), Sidney Spencer (1955), Morse Wilbur (1956), Hunston Williams (1962) James Luther Adams and John McLachlan (1972) amongst others.

These spiritual and mystical sources have exerted an influence to varying degree as some Unitarian thinkers and tendencies have returned to them to balance against the more generally prevailing rationalist emphasis.

These theological sources, including the conception, emphasised by Ochino and others, that the Spirit of God is active throughout human affairs, and "that the inner voice of the Spirit is superior even to the written word of scripture" (quoted in McLachlan 1972, p. 116) have continuing (and increasing) resonance in contemporary Unitarianism, as it seeks to affirm inclusiveness of religious diversity within a pluralist and rationalistic framework.

A spiritual tradition in which individual, unmediated experience of the divine has not necessarily been anti-trinitarian, indeed many mystics have relied on the security of doctrinal orthodoxy, but as Sarah Mortimer notes, the mystical vision is one which "implied a kind of spiritual egalitarianism" (2010, p.168) – because such experience is direct and not dependent on administration by church or clergy.

For this reason manifestations of mysticism have sometimes been perceived as a threat to the exclusive doctrinal authority of a centralised ecclesial power. Movements such as the thirteenth-century Joachimites, the pan-European 'Movement of the Free Spirit', the Beguines and

Beghards and others were swiftly suppressed by the Catholic Church, but their influence and appeal may have contributed to a popular receptivity to the ideas of religious toleration and freedom of conscience characteristic of the early reforming traditions. (see eg. Bochenski 2013, Brunn and Burgard 1989, Vanegeim, 1989, Spencer 1965).

Karkkainnen (2002) considers the Anabaptist tradition one which unites the individual experience of the Spirit with the rational interpretation of scripture. He traces the development of the pneumatology of Anabaptist and other "free church traditions" from a clear demarcation between God and human spirit towards "a much more intimate and unmediated influence of the Spirit of God on the human spirit". This is a theological development which implies or anticipates a more liberal "immanent pneumatology" (2002, p.57).

In the seventeenth century the Remonstrant and Collegiant movements in the Dutch United Provinces were to provide safe harbour for Socinians, Unitarians and an Anabaptist remnant fleeing religious persecution and this was to be a point of departure from mainland Europe to Britain for these theological strands of radicalism in the intellectually fertile period of the Civil War (see Preus, 1998, p.8). There is an interplay of influence between Remonstrant, Collegiant, Socinian and Unitarian ideas, including the central concepts of religious toleration and freedom of conscience, which may be seen to develop through the works of Episcopus, Grotius, Limborch. The Collegiant group in Amsterdam were, according to Preus, "hospitable to all sorts of religious 'refugees' – people who for one reason or another had lost their homes in established religious communities" (1998, p.9), they participated in the flow and counterflow of Socinian, Unitarian and puritan mystical thinkers from England to Europe. Voogt (2005) notes that [the] "...roots of Collegiantism in the spiritualist tradition have regularly been noted in the literature." (p.415) and he also emphasises the influence of anti-trinitarians Servetus, Acontius and Castellio on Remonstrant and Collegiant thought.

Samuel Fisher, a former Baptist and influential voice among the exiled Quakers in Amsterdam, and Spinoza, both published works of Biblical criticism, and Popkin suggests that "the metaphysical foundation of moral certainty that Spinoza presents in his *Tractatus* can be discerned..." in a pamphlet on which Spinoza also collaborated in 1661 called *The Light upon the Candlestick* (p. 42) which is clearly rooted in Anabaptist, Socinian and mystical thought and emphasises the inner experience of the divine as universal and divinely inspired.

Jonathan Israel (2010, pp.181-202) acknowledges the complex

relationships between Collegiant rationalist-philosophical and “deeply pious and sincere” theological tendencies and describes between them; “an area of compatibility sufficiently extensive to ground what proved to be a long term intellectual and tactical association with far reaching historical implications.” (p.183). Israel accepts that the “exact boundary between this tendency rationalistic Socinian and clandestine Spinozistic Christianity was far from clear” but he is nevertheless able to affirm that between them Collegiant Spinozist Socinianism evidenced “not only...marked affinities... but what can be said to be integrally part of the same wider shift that in the eighteenth century generated a politically and socially radical strand of Unitarianism, especially in England” (p.190). Israel also suggests that Spinoza’s alliance with the Socinians was grounded in his philosophy and theory of religion: it is evident in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* that Spinoza considers that providing a serious and coherent critical examination of the Biblical sources and theological tradition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is important. He takes care to translate and explain his understanding of the Spirit of God and his interpretation of the Hebrew word; *Ruach*, in a lengthy passage of the first chapter of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1669 pp.12-16). In this passage Spinoza contends that the Spirit or breath of God is synonymous with the power, mind, intention and affect of God as perceived by human faculties and in so doing prepares the conceptual ground on which to propose that God and nature are coterminous.

It could be objected that these visions of the Holy Spirit removed or abstracted from traditional Christian trinitarian theology make it impossible to distinguish God’s Spirit indwelling in us from our own spirit. Alternatively it might be said that the Spinozist conception of ‘God or Nature’ downgrades the Spirit from the divine realm, making it identical with ‘life force’ or some other physical agency, de-sacralising and ‘domesticating’ God’s Spirit. Both of these objections are in some senses the same and are referred to as “a problem of God-world relation” by Philip Clayton (2004, pp.73-91). His ‘panentheist analogy’ seeks to resolve this tension conceive the nature of Infinite Spirit based on our experience as embodied agents (in Hinze 2001, p.194). Clayton identifies a development from the ‘one substance’ Spirit theology of Spinoza and others, in which all things are ‘modes’ within a single substance, and traces its influence on idealist and especially liberal theological philosophers such as Shleiermacher, to its evolution as a Spirit theology in which, although God and world are non-separable, neither are they the same, but instead they imply relationship, diversity and community.

In order to maintain its own denominational cohesion such precepts immediately demanded of the Unitarian movement a reliance on

relational ethics, and the call for the concept of 'community' to over-ride concerns arising from divergent doctrine, liturgy or procedure. As with the Collegiant group, whose eventual disavowal of the inspiration of the Spirit (Preus 1998, p.10) was undercut by deeply pious religious inclinations, so were Unitarian's rationalism coloured from the first with explicitly spiritual sensibilities. These sensibilities intersected with the Romantic movement; and are evident in the work of Wickstead, Taylor, Thom and Martineau. This group, active as ministers and academics, were encouraged by the support of the popular American radical Unitarians William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, whose reforming sermons, emphasising a broad and inclusive Church based on an essentialist distillation of Christianity to its most simple and intelligible form, are echoed by their British counterparts. Reinforced by these newest American theologies then, Martineau and his colleagues were to steer Unitarianism away from both secular naturalist and conservative Christian doctrinal tendencies towards an explicitly spiritual 'Free Christianity' which was often to emphasise its Pneumatological basis. Martineau in particular devoted considerable energy towards foregrounding the idea of divine agency, "the Divine Life in our humanity" and the sovereignty of the conscience where "spirit is present with spirit" (1905, p.582) within Unitarian theological consideration in academic and pastoral contexts. Martineau was also to publish (in 1868) an influential defence of Spinoza in which he acknowledges Spinoza's links to Collegiants, his 'mystical attraction', and influence on Schleirmacher and Coleridge. (1882 pp.16-19, pp. 327-330).

Joseph Estlin Carpenter (grandson of minister Rev Lant Carpenter and friend of Ram Mohan Roy) was to contribute significantly to the development of the study of *Comparative Religion*, publishing the first work of that title in 1913 and setting a template for Unitarian consideration of religion which was committed to the principle that all religious traditions were evidence of divine revelation, and none had a monopoly of spiritual truth. Sidney Spencer studied for Unitarian ministry and took an honours degree in the newly formulated academic subject category 'Comparative Religion'.

Sidney Spencer's great contribution to Unitarian thinking in the post war period was to unite the two main strands of twentieth-century Unitarianism: an essentialist, interfaith universalism with a radical spiritual mysticism. Spencer proposes that the evidence of divine revelation in all religious traditions is to be discovered in the record of the experiences of their mystics, the unity of which he describes as a; "profoundly impressive testimony to the reality of God" (1963, p. 51). He affirms that the particularly Unitarian approach to other religious traditions; assuming that 'revelation is not sealed' and recognising that

no one tradition contains the monopoly of spiritual truth, is honouring, de facto, the universal presence of the Holy Spirit in all traditions. Spencer also by this same means proposes an emphasis on the inner purpose which motivates social action and identifies this as the Unitarian Christian understanding of the presence of the Spirit of God in human affairs, an understanding which motivates compassionate solidarity and underpins action for social justice. The development and acceleration of the humanist Unitarian tendency which originated in America, coincided with Spencer's explicitly theological approach to social responsibility and action. Humanist Unitarians also foregrounded social concern but from the opposite perspective, tending to consider that having removed the obligation for religious observance the new focus of Unitarian energy should be the social obligations of religious community and social interaction. For both obligations Unitarian humanists tended to enlist the inspiration and celebration of the human spirit and were often able to re-utilize language of the Spirit in a desacralized context. Perhaps of even greater importance for the recent development of the Unitarian denomination has been the way in which the language of Spirit has been instrumental in providing a space for the witness of women.

The importance of Pneumatology for the development of a genuinely liberal religious tradition cannot be overstated. From Socinus and Ochino onwards Unitarians have seen the action of God as a spiritual force within and throughout nature and human culture, and therefore to identify the Spirit with progressive, emancipatory and liberating political initiatives. More recently in an age concerned with clarifying the links between linguistic and political realities the gender freedom of a non-personified vision of God as Spirit has aided a retreat from patriarchal or doctrinally constrained limitations.

Martineau's phrase that Unitarians; "believe in incarnation not of Jesus exclusively but man universally and God everlastingly" (quoted in Hall, 1950) appears to have a continuing significance linking the traditionally 'low' Christology of Socinian and Arian influenced nonconformity with the spirit based religious naturalism of those who perceive divine incarnation in everyday life which is brought into particular focus in regular acts of devotional worship. In their influential report on the 'subjective turn' to non-traditional and 'new age' religion *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005), sociologists of religion Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead categorise the Unitarian congregation as a congregation of 'experiential humanity'. Experiential humanity they define as a religious form which emphasises the human inner experience of the divine above scriptural or sacramental external forms (a definition strikingly close to McLachlan's description of the theology of Bernardo Ochino above). Describing Unitarian worship they report:

> Instead of there being an external check on what counts as spiritual, it is only within the depths of personal experience that the Spirit can be encountered – indeed the Spirit is these depths, depths in which individual life is found to connect with all other life (p.21).

This analysis recalls James Martineau's insights expressed most fully in *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (1890).

Writing in 1955 Sidney Spencer conceived God as; "...the Spirit immanent in the whole of being, while immeasurably transcendent." (p.63). Although he was writing for a new readership who he aimed to introduce to Unitarian ideas it is arguable that Spencer was not significantly adding to the ideas of Spinoza which Priestley and Coleridge had found could be absorbed into their theological conceptual framework in the eighteenth century and which allowed them to initiate an enduring strand of 'rational mysticism' into the denominational dynamic which had until then been dominated by a presbyterian reliance on the complete authority of scripture. They were followed by other Unitarians, esoterics like Emerson who spoke of the indwelling Supreme Spirit in his infamous *Harvard Divinity School address* (Geldard, 2001, p.27), and humanistic pietists like Martineau who argued that the 'seat of authority' in religion was the inner prompting of the Spirit. In the twentieth century John F. Heyward has said that secular liberalism has absorbed this language, transmuting it; "into a religious worship of the Human Spirit." (1962, p. 71). If this is so it confirms the thesis of John D. Caputo who, in his book of dialogues with Gianni Vattimo, *After The Death of God* (2007), asserts that a 'Spectral Hermeneutic' - the hermeneutic of the Holy Ghost – perceives *kenosis* as: not the abandonment or dissolution of God but the 'transcription' of God into time and history (p.74).

The theology and hermeneutics of the Spirit in Unitarianism derive from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Anabaptism, and the Christian humanism of Rennaissance Italy; both implied an underlying tolerance which could be found within Christian doctrine despite the contemporary battles and immolations which suggested the contrary. The reworking of Christian doctrine by Socinian and other proto-Unitarian theologies to emphasise human agency, the primacy of the will and sovereignty of the conscience, were later subsumed and appropriated into overtly rationalist and humanist traditions. These sources may infuse Unitarian alternatives to a Trinitarian Christianity, patriarchal monotheism and authoritarian neoliberalism with enduring values and implied theological ideas; a gender neutral divinity, an emphasis on relationality and a high value on egalitarianism, which

continue to be influential within Unitarian thinking.

What Spencer described as a Unitarian Christian understanding of the presence of the Spirit of God in human affairs may, in a contemporary religious setting, be broadened to include Unitarian non-Christian understandings of Spirit in human affairs and throughout nature. This understanding, which recalls Priestleyan rationalism as well as Martineau's spiritual mysticism, may point towards a post-atheist, 'rational-mystic' pneumatological perspective. This perspective is already present as a lived reality within worship, hymnody, liturgy and material culture within a contemporary Unitarian denominational context.

This paper is based on a dissertation *Making the Invisible, Visible: Unitarian Theologies of the Spirit - An Introductory Consideration of Pneumatology in Unitarian Tradition, Worship and Praxis* written with the supervision of Dr J. Meggitt of Cambridge University, and on conversations with John Heyderman of Beit Klal Yisrael.

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Towards a Unitarian Theology for the twenty-first century

DAVID STEERS

I always feel very privileged to have not only been trained for the ministry at the Unitarian College, Manchester but also to have studied theology in what was then the Faculty of Theology at Manchester University. Both institutions plus the input of what was then called the Northern Federation for Training in Ministry made for a seriously professional, high grade three years of training. A training in theology.

At the centre of that period for me was the advice, example, intellect, teaching, knowledge and *anecdotes* of the principal at the time, the Rev Arthur Long. Arthur's theological knowledge within Unitarianism was unsurpassed, it was as broad as it was deep, academically robust and tied in to an extensive pastoral experience – a combination that is actually very rare for those who teach in theological colleges or theology faculties.

Because of his position in the Faculty and the Federation Arthur interacted fully and creatively with every shade of theology in the Christian tradition. In fact he had always done this throughout his ministry as can be seen in his still useful book published by the Lindsey Press as long ago as 1963: *Faith and Understanding: Critical Essays in Christian Doctrine*.

And one of the central elements of his teaching within UCM was a full, detailed and comprehensive course in Unitarian Theology. This was an invaluable grounding for anyone preparing for the ministry, an absolutely essential examination of Unitarian theological ideas, their origins, development and contemporary relevance. I can't imagine being equipped for the ministry without it and look back on nearly thirty years of ministry, the first ten of them spent in Belfast during the still ongoing 'Troubles', as being underpinned by what I learnt from Arthur.

Most casual outsiders would take something like this for granted. Isn't that what you go to theological college for? Isn't that what you do in a theology degree? Learn about theology, learn to think theologically?

Unfortunately that is increasingly not how Unitarianism chooses to present itself. It wasn't always that way. In the eighteenth century

Joseph Priestley set himself the task of producing a theological statement of what he believed in every year, and his expression of his own personal Unitarian theology went through 30,000 copies in multiple editions in fifteen years.[1]

What has developed increasingly as the twenty-first century has progressed is an attitude that is anti-theological, that essentially makes a virtue of having no intellectual rootednesss, that denies any kind of structural, thoughtful basis for Unitarianism. This process has probably been accelerated by the revision of the objects originally in the 1990s, which out of fear of providing prescriptive, absolute terms of what Unitarianism is about, instead spoke only in terms of vague principles.

If I had been able to be here with you today I was going to begin this talk with a game, called 'Unitarian or not Unitarian?' I had a succession of theological quotations from different people in different eras and it would have been your job to identify if you thought it was a Unitarian speaking or not. The idea would be not only to show the shifting sands of what might constitute Unitarianism but also the changing perceptions of Unitarians of what might or might not be included within the Unitarian canon of belief. You'll just have to take my word for it that it would have been a really good game. But it was meant to highlight the uncertainty and vagueness that has crept in to Unitarianism as a body of ideas, as a credible collection of thinking responses to the world in terms of its theological challenges.

The late Professor R.K Webb put it like this, when reviewing the twentieth century:

> As it lost its theological content, Unitarian thinking seemed to splinter into competing enthusiasms - a fascination with non-Christian religions, social service, socialism, the peace movement, temperance, vegetarianism, even spiritualism.[2]

That phrase 'competing enthusiasms' always seems a particularly painful barb, and it is painful because it is accurate. Although some of his other phrases are not perhaps too resonant in the second decade of the twenty-first century some are and the other undeniably important phrase in R.K Webb's quotation is his opener – 'As [Unitarianism] lost its theological content…'

There can be no doubt that Unitarianism *has* lost its theological content and sometimes seems to rejoice in this. Those who were present at the General Assembly in this year will have seen the film 'From Vision to Action: Next Steps Video and Report'[3]

This is a well put together and engaging video and parts of it are actually quite encouraging, positive and uplifting but there is also an undercurrent that is anti-congregational and anti-theological. Partly this comes from the entirely laudatory desire to create and explore new ways of being 'church', and as ever with Unitarians there is a very touching sense of people thinking they are doing something entirely new when, in fact, mainstream churches have already rolled out similar projects such as 'Fresh Expressions' which work on the same desire to create new ways of interacting with sections of society that have no time for organised religion. Although the whole Unitarian Vision project is meant to "to support the development of new and rekindled congregations without diverting General Assembly resources from existing congregations and other ongoing efforts"[4] you get the impression through phrases used in the film such as "I think we have to break out of the church model", "we are not about church, prayer", "the focus is kindness not theology" and "we are looking for people to be active on a national level" that there is little on offer to sustain congregational life of any traditional type. This is pity because the very heart of any religious movement but particularly in the kind of tradition which we represent is always the congregation, and this is where most theological discourse will take place.

Andrew Hill set out the importance of the congregation in a piece written a few years ago:

> A church is like a tree. Once sown and given the right conditions it is required to grow by its very nature. Its tap root will reach down to "the inexhaustible depth and ground of all being" (Tillich); while its surface roots will draw on the rich nutrients disclosed by the many Christs and Bodhisattvas who have shared our humanity, leaving us deep wells of wisdom.
>
> By its nature a church is radical. That means it has roots providing anchorage, strength and direction. A church draws on these resources, conserves them from dissipation and loss and renews them in its trans-generational community. A church is a concentrated stream of life struggling through increasingly disordered surroundings.[5]

We have to nourish our congregational life, we have to value it and the shared ministries that flow from it. There are lots of things congregations can and should do but unless they have some idea of who they are and what they are about they will have no lasting impact. Generally, given that a major proportion of our congregations can be dated back to the seventeenth century, it is reasonable to assume that

they have been fairly secure in their identity and purpose. Few institutions last for more than a generation or so, those that do – like church congregations – must be offering something of value.

I have started with congregations because I believe they are the base communities of our theological and communal project. It is not the only type of community, there are other ways they can and should be developed, but they are a given and our traditional way of working.

Famously T.S. Eliot expresses this idea:

What life have you, if you have not life together?
There is not life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.[6]

But with that community in mind let's explore the theological basis for the Unitarian movement. About eight years ago I was offered a very good job in England related to work in a religious sphere although not the ministry. For various reasons I didn't take it but unusually for me the interview went quite well until the final question when the chair of the panel, a Baptist, asked what was the USP of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian or Unitarian church? I hadn't expected what is a perfectly good, even obvious, question and began to explain the cultural and historical differences between Irish Non-Subscription and English Unitarianism. But then I realised that there was a very simple answer, one that I believe encompasses both the NSPCI and the GA and which if I didn't believe in it I wouldn't be a minister in this tradition and if I didn't believe it was what the movement stood for wouldn't stay in it.

I said that the USP – the Unique Selling Point – of the Unitarian movement was that it successfully balanced the twin faculties of faith and reason. If we depart from either of these we abandon our principles and our identity, we become (to adapt a quotation from James Martineau) "a traitor to [our] spiritual ancestry, and a deserter to the camp of its persecutors."[7]

If we over-emphasise one against the other then we start to lose our purpose. Without faith we fail to be guided by a power greater than ourselves, we lose the roots for our social action and witness in the world. Without reason we have no safeguard against being led astray and no protection against delusion. Once upon a time it might have been thought that it is the faith side of the equation that is most often jettisoned by Unitarians but I think unfortunately reason has frequently been forgotten in some manifestations of Unitarian belief in recent years. A church or denomination without either seems particularly pitiable.

We have to be a people of faith or there is really no point in turning up. We have to own and share a faith that is vibrant and vital, a living thing that we share with enthusiasm and joy, without that we really have no point. In the Psalms it says:

> I was glad when they said to me,
> "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"[8]

And our faith should make us glad, we should be uplifted by it, in the end it is what sustains us.

The countless people we meet who declare "that they like to make their own minds up" or "don't like being told what to believe" or "like to think for themselves" etc. etc. and who **we** confidently declare to be part of that much vaunted tribe of people who are *Unitarians without knowing it*, generally can see no point in why they should come to church or become part of a wider community. But if they do come then they need to connect with what that community stands for, with its faith. And we need to be sure about who we are.

Why is it, we might ask, that the not entirely dissimilar Quakers have a much higher recognition factor in the population in general and also are able to participate much more easily in ecumenical institutions for instance? In part it is something to do with knowing and understanding their own tradition. If we knew our own tradition better we would be more confident and more open to participation in the broader religious life of this country.

In theological terms, at its most basic level, any church or movement or denomination operates within a matrix that pulls it in three directions. Put simply these are Scripture, Tradition and Culture.

A lot of Unitarians would demur at two of these. I have already tried to suggest why tradition is very important. History has bequeathed us many things one of them is a remarkable set of congregational buildings which are very often extremely valuable resources in prime sites if we knew how to use them. Yet I have seen Unitarians struggle on public occasions to explain why they possess a large gothic church with stained glass windows, a chancel and all the rest of it, or why they possess a quaint little chapel of great antiquity. But if we take the congregation as the prime place where theological discourse should take place let's start by looking at the local tradition, where appropriate. Who built this, why did they build it, why here, who has been involved, what did they do, what did they believe? How do we relate to them? What physical archives do we possess? What is this valuable looking

communion plate – should we find out more about it, give it to a museum or sell it at auction with an incorrect provenance? (I write this as a former assistant minister of Cross Street Chapel)[9]. After we have examined the local tradition let's look at the wider picture, who was Joseph Priestley, what was important about James Martineau, what happened in 1662? There are many more questions like this but it is important to know *the stories*, it is the tradition that colours and shapes us, we shouldn't be limited by it or so absorbed in it that we lose sight of the future but we should use it as a foundation for what we do today.

Tradition is not something that any religion can function without. It's often pointed out that all tradition at some point has to be invented but there is a course of history in which we belong which we should cherish. It really is the case too that if we don't someone else will. There is one chapel not so far from here that still contains all the accoutrements of that place's past, sold off to an evangelical group who were only too happy to appropriate them. And this is not a unique occurrence.

Also if we don't value our tradition we have nothing to test new ideas against, for a liberal denomination this is actually a much more important thing than we might imagine. In many ways Unitarians could be very vulnerable to infiltration by outside groups and it is surprising that there have been so few attempts at this, although this chapel was once subject to a very serious take-over bid from outside.

So what about Scripture? This could cause more discomfort to modern Unitarians than anything else. But really it shouldn't. Leaving aside for now the history of interpretation and translation of the Bible, in which Unitarians have played a not unimportant part at times, let's acknowledge that our attitude cannot be the same as it was at any period in the past. But if we jettison the Bible completely we miss out on an engagement with the divine in human affairs that has resonated in our world for thousands of years. It has done this because it contains some sort of truth, but it does require effort to uncover it. Not making that effort is another way of diminishing our acquaintance with spiritual questions. If we abandon all Scripture(s) we will be tempted to replace it with the facile and the superficial.

With regard to culture this is another area where there is a creative tension. We can't speak to culture unless we are to some extent outside it; we can't have any impact unless we are also in it. The late Robert Runcie, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said:

> A church which listens only to its own tradition will end up speaking only to itself. A church which listens only to what is

> happening in the world, will end up becoming only a dull echo of the latest liberal fashion.[10]

I am sure he didn't have Unitarians in mind when he said that but it clearly is a problem for us at times.

Rising up to be part of wider society is something that every individual church should aspire to. Another great Unitarian, H.L. Short, examining the role of religious dissent in the community, put it like this:

> Great causes do not die because of opposition; usually... opposition is a stimulus. Nor do they die because of internal differences; often these arouse debate and emulation. They are more likely to collapse because of inner weariness and a loss of contact with the main stream of life in the community. A church must not only preach to its already converted members a doctrine which they consider true; it must have an effective place in the wider world. It must have some contemporary relevance, some function in the social order, some contribution to make to the intellectual life of the time. Liberty is not permission to withdraw from the world's battles; we are not mere quietists.[11]

But we exist in other contexts too. A major change in British society over the last forty years has been the vast expansion of the numbers of followers of other world religions. Gradually the contact and exchange between the different religions has increased but I am not sure that Unitarians, while being keen, have had that much positive impact. You have to have something to bring to inter-faith debate for any constructive dialogue to take place. Many years ago, in fact when I was still at school, I was struck by the validity of the picture – which I heard presented by a Unitarian minister on television - of religion being like a mountain and everyone on the mountain finding their own way to the summit. Each person – each religion - had its own route but they were all engaged essentially in the same process. I now realise that this is true - but - you still have to climb that mountain yourself, it is not enough to observe, you have to engage with the process yourself.

One of the problems with the self-expressed pluralism of Unitarianism in recent decades is that it hinders rather than helps engagement with the divine. Cliff Reed put it like this in a letter to the *Inquirer* a few years ago:

> A liberal congregation that is firmly rooted theologically is actually better able to meet the needs of the range of faith

> positions that can be categorised as part of our tradition…From a firm, yet truly liberal, standpoint it is possible to be more open to other views, voices and spiritual experiences than otherwise.[12]

He also went on to quote a passage from the American Rabbis' prayer book, 'Gates of Prayer':

> I cannot be religious without belonging to a particular religion any more than I can talk without using a particular language.[13]

We do need to become fluent again in our own religion, if we want to speak to people of other faiths we have to have a faith of our own.

As a member of the Council of the International Association for Religious Freedom for ten years I was very blessed to be able to work, discuss and worship with people from all over the world who were members of all the main world religions, and some of the minor ones. Under the leadership of Robert Traer and Andrew Clark the IARF became a very effective organisation for inter-faith dialogue and for education supporting religious freedom. But for some decades before its focus had been somewhere else, it had been a proponent of what was called 'liberal religion'. This was very much a buzz word within Unitarianism that thankfully seems to have had its day, it was based upon a premise that there was some kind of fellowship between followers of 'liberal' religion from all over the world. This was fine when the context was, as it had been originally, liberal Christianity, but had no real meaning as a term in a broader sense, it was a concept really unknown and unfamiliar amongst many groups in Asia for instance who were liberal and religious but were not 'liberal religions'. Yet this idea was pushed very hard for decades and had a baleful influence on Unitarianism in Britain.

It had its roots in the United States and was probably the main theological element of international relations for the Unitarian Universalist Association. It went out of fashion because the UUA developed new structures for relating with the rest of the world which, put simply, posited themselves as part of a global religion of UUs. This ignores the fact that UUs only really exist in the United States or in places where there are concentrations of UUs from the US. Yet, increasingly, in Britain, you can see the use of Unitarian Universalism as the name of churches or of the movement or of people here. We are essentially being rebranded. One of the problems with this is that almost everyone who uses the term 'Universalist' here, who is not themselves from America, does not realise that it refers to a denomination which

promoted the Christian notion of universal salvation rather than some kind of all-faiths approach.

There is an effort to harness a version of tradition to this new world religion. Andrea Greenwood's and Mark W. Harris' book. *An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions* acknowledges the difficulties but still tries to weld the history, practices and beliefs of Transylvanian or British Unitarians to the UUA.

But again if we acquaint ourselves with our own tradition, in our own society, if we establish dialogue with our neighbours and participate in activities where we can with other churches and religions we will find purpose and direction. Our position, in a society that still has an established religion, is one of dissent, a concept basically unknown in most American history. Britain is also a far less religiously defined society, it is increasingly secularised while at the same time accommodating more diversity, quite unlike the United States where some sort of 'orthodox' religion is generally a given for most people. We have to find ways to engage with the situation as we encounter it, I don't believe there is any real market for atheist inspired churches here. There may be in America where the concept of church or religious observance is such a strong one, even those who have abandoned any traditional religious allegiance can still find purpose in the outer symbols of religiosity, but that has few echoes here.

What we do have here in this country, which appears to be quite successful and which is very proudly, defiantly, atheist is the so-called Sunday Assembly. But watch one of their videos, observe the gleeful earnestness of the participants, take in the arm waving, the singing and excitement of the mainly youthful participants. Then watch a video of, say, worship at Holy Trinity Brompton, the home of the Alpha Course and tell me the difference. If you turned the sound down you wouldn't be able to tell the one from the other.

There might be things we can learn from both the Sunday Assembly and Holy Trinity but as rational dissenters surely we stand somewhere else?

We have a tradition of rational dissent but that has to include an engagement with faith. I don't believe there are many people who want to come to church just to discuss religion. We have to do more than that. But it is a daunting task. H.L. Short observed this decades ago:

> A church cannot live merely by consuming its own ideas. Willingly or not, it must join in the general debate. Our

> ancestors in the 18th century made an effort to bridge the gap between Christian faith and the new scientific world-view…Science and its child, technology, now rule the world, and Christian orthodoxy, in spite of ecumenical enthusiasm, is a minority and an irrelevance. But where do we stand? It is not enough to say that we believe in freedom of enquiry, and that this is enough to put us on the side of science. Is religion of any kind, whether liberal or orthodox, relevant in our secular world? What do we contribute to the great debate of our time?[14]

The first task it to hold our own line, to build our communities, communities that are open and engaged, that are familiar with who we are and what we stand for. Andrew Hill puts it like this:

> In a growing church, always the commanding vision is in control – not the building, not the committee, not the treasurer, not the dead hand of the past, not the lay and/or professional ministry – but the commanding vision. A growing church is one that worships and prays and reads scriptures and celebrates, and flinches not from every possible occasion when the commanding vision can be set before it.[15]

Have we got a "commanding vision", something that is truly our own and true to our identity, history and tradition? If we have then we will grow. As I have said it needs to combine both faith and reason, it needs to exist at the confluence between the two.

I'll give the last word to Arthur Long:

> The trend which I would like to see growing and prospering within contemporary Unitarianism is one which, while insisting, on the one hand, that religion is meaningless without symbolism, metaphor, mystery and imagination, nevertheless also remains quietly confident that what we need above all is an undiminished trust in reason and intellectual argument.[16]

[1] Robert E. Schofield, 'Priestley, Joseph (1733–1804)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. http://www.oxforddnb.com/.

[2] R.K. Webb, 'The Unitarian Background', in Barbara Smith (ed.), *Truth Liberty Religion: Essays celebrating Two Hundred Years of Manchester College*, Manchester College Oxford, 1986, p.26.

[3] https://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/vision-action-next-steps-video-and-report

[4] https://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/2020-congregational-development

[5] Andrew Hill, ‘Compelled to Grow’, *Ministerial Fellowship Supplement* [to the *Inquirer*], n.d., p.1.
[6] T.S. Eliot, ‘Choruses from the “The Rock”’.
[7] James Drummond & C. B. Upton (eds.), *The Life and Letters of James Martineau*. Vol. 2, New York & London 1902, pp.141-2.
[8] Psalm 122 v.1. RSV.
[9] David Steers, ‘Don’t sell off the family silver – Communion silver was sold on eBay’, *Inquirer*, 11 October 2014, pp. 8-9.
[10] Quoted in Arthur Long, *Current Trends in British Unitarianism*, Belfast 1997, p. 32.
[11] H.L. Short, *Dissent and the Community*, The Essex Hall Lecture, 1962, p.32.
[12] Cliff Reed, letter, *Inquirer*, 28 July 2007, p.10.
[13] Ibid.
[14] H.L. Short, op cit., p.33.
[15] Andrew Hill, op cit.
[16] Arthur Long, op cit., p.30.

Contributions

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