



I BELIEVE

Bruce Findlow

THE 1974 ESSEX HALL LECTURE

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This is the Essex Hall Lecture for 1974, and was delivered in London on April 20, 1974. Essex Hall is the headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation met two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892, and many distinguished persons in varied fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the annual meetings of the Assembly.

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A UNITARIAN THEOLOGY

IN any educated community, and in some degree, in any community, theology is of the essence of religion. Preceding the most primitive religious rituals in the minds of those who create and enact them are ideas which, if coherent, can be called a theology. Arising out of the simplest kinds of religious experience are ideas, by way of exclamation or explanation, which, linked together, may become a person's or a group's theology. The word means the science of religion or, in a dictionary definition, the "methodical arrangement of the truths of religion in their natural connection." In the Unitarian tradition theology is important, our existence as a separate movement rests upon it. It is not enough to think of our religion in terms of good human relationships, or familiar rituals, or social concern, or loyalty to an institution. In these matters we are indistinguishable from many others of other faiths or none. A Unitarian theology makes one a Unitarian and therefore it is important for each of us to be able to recognise, if not say, what beliefs make up our theology, be it rudimentary or profound. It is important, not to learn a Unitarian theology nor to accept a Unitarian theology, but to recognise, if not say, what our own theology is.

Unitarian theology is natural theology, understood as akin to "the study of God by the light of human reason", and we think of it as a continuing study which brings about changes of theological understanding in every generation. This continuing study is primarily and necessarily the work of individual Unitarians, a little helped from time to time perhaps by seminars, commissions, or the contrived consensus of a particular congregation. If we wish to study the history of Unitarian theology we will do so in terms of what Parker and Channing and Martineau and Jacks and others believed.

I have set myself the task of trying to say what my Unitarian theology is at this time. All of us have ideas about religion and life in our heads and we may live in a hand-to-mouth way by dipping into them piecemeal when we need to do so. To make a theology of them we have to attempt a methodical arrangement of the truths of religion as we see them. We have to find a shape and then fill it with contents. My theology today starts from beliefs about the world in which we live, the universe and the planet earth. From there it proceeds to a view of man's place in the world and his nature, his belief in God, his purpose and destiny. Then come considerations related to values, the subject of good and evil, the meaning of suffering and the working of divine and human powers in society. Then, turning inwards perhaps, I will seek my beliefs about organised religion, the meaning of worship and prayer, the relations between different religions, the place of the man Jesus — that founder figure of the Christian faith about whom so many different things have

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been believed and declared. Finally, I have to see what I believe about stillness and action in relation to religion and to life. Perhaps I should say that theology does not mean to me proving all that one believes, but stating methodically and justifying by reason as much as one can and showing why, in some places, belief without proof is justifiable or necessary.

As I see it, a Unitarian theology is primarily an individual one, but hopefully there will be many points of agreement between Unitarian individuals which indicate areas of shared Unitarian theology in our churches and movement. Each statement by an individual provides an opportunity for all of us to recognise by agreement or disagreement, what our own beliefs are and how strongly and clearly we hold them. The vitality of the whole movement and of each church, the quality of our relationships with one another and all others, the intensity of our concern for peace and justice in the world — all these things depend upon what we believe, individually and collectively, and how strongly and clearly we hold our beliefs.

WHAT KIND OF A WORLD?

In our century human knowledge has extended greatly in two directions. Advancing technology has helped man to look out into space and to discover more of the universe, as he finds the means to see farther; while another kind of technological advance has allowed him to look deeply into the universe of the atom. New universes, new worlds, we might say, the one very large and the other very small, have come within our view and knowledge, sometimes increasing and sometimes confusing our understanding. We have known for long of the great distances between the named planets of our own solar system; but now we are learning that beyond our system are others like and unlike it; suns in abundance, planets, stars, gases, dusts, heat, power; together constituting a living universe of such immense proportions that we may think of it as infinite. It is clear that we inhabit a living, changing universe. How it began is not yet known but there are competing theories. No-one, however, who has tried to embrace the facts which are known now argues that the beginning and continuance of the universe depend upon the existence of God. Most will agree that increasing knowledge of the universe is bound to fill us with wonder and awe and even dread, and that human judgments about the planet earth must accept that, in terms both of time and of space, it is a small part of the universe, a small world.

But the planet earth is our home and is bound to seem more important to us than anything else in the universe. In many ways it is, for us, a well-explored, well-known place; and out of his own situation man has shaped theories for his comfort and understanding about origins and destinies, about purposes and properties. The Bible, for example, gave us creation stories which have profoundly affected human understanding in the western

world. But now, in mid-twentieth century, if we accept the knowledge now available about the planet earth we are likely to arrive at a different world-view from that derived from the Bible, and, as a result, we will see much of the detail of life in a different light.

In the immensity of the universe we see the earth as a small place with conditions of atmosphere which have produced over millions of years a rich variety of life forms in the sea, on the land, in the air; plants and creatures; creatures ranging from almost invisible insects to elephants, and including man. We have learned that there is a life-giving force in the combination of heat and light and moisture which prevails strongly and persists vigorously. We can see a process by which things appear to have come to be as they are and to explain why some species have continued while others have ceased to be. We have learned to recognise how slowly changes come in living things and sometimes we can see how and why these have taken place. We are less confident than our forefathers about the existence of unchangeable laws, and content perhaps to recognise orderly processes in this living world sufficient in number and in orderliness to suggest, but not prove, that the process of life as a whole is orderly rather than chaotic. We can see now that the life of the earth rests upon intricate, comprehensive, continuing, often cyclical, relationships between all that lives, including man. Ecology is the new discipline which challenges the view that the earth is our playground and provision store.

In an immense and marvellous universe we inhabit a planet full of life and find ourselves, as individual human beings and as a species, to be part of an unceasing life process which is also immense and marvellous to contemplate. We cannot claim for the earth any special place in the universe and certainly no central place, but it is special and central to us in the same way as our own homes and towns are in relation to the whole country. We have to accept that the nature of the earth is determined by its place in the universe and in the solar system to which it belongs. We ought to recognise that the resources of the earth are not miraculously provided to meet human needs but are the fruits of long and patient processes and elements of chance and change. There is nothing in advancing knowledge of the world to make us less religious, if being religious means approaching this life with wonder, humility, truthfulness and thankfulness.

WHAT STATUS FOR HUMANITY?

If we do not accept the old view that man was divinely created in the image of God, we are more likely, in the light of our present knowledge, to see man in a process of becoming; and as we see how the child, in a favourable environment, grows from weakness to strength, from ignorance to knowledge, from selfishness to unselfishness, we may take the view that

humanity, in a favourable environment, is following the same course. We may then infer that this is the natural or true or intended course for humanity. From such a basis we have built a most exalted status for man. We are entitled to govern the earth and, as possessors of that combination of qualities and powers which we call personality, we think of ourselves as exemplars or as uniquely superior in the evolutionary process. We have reasoned from our self-awareness and achievements that the aim of the life-process is the building up of personality and that this has reached its highest point so far in the human species. We argue or dream that man will go higher yet and when that view is related to ideas of divinity, we can think of man as "little less than a god" and destined to be godlike.

But from the same starting point of belief in slow evolutionary development we may take a different view of humanity which lies somewhere between the notion that man is a fallen creature and the idea that he has risen higher than any other creature. This middle view is that we stand lower in the scheme of things on the earth than we might have done because human development has taken a wrong course. I see man learning to survive in a hostile environment in the times long before our recorded history, by the development of ingenuity; thought leading to invention and action and gradually drawing humanity into the role writ large in the world of today. We survive as a species less by co-operating with the life around us than by dominating, using, changing our environment for our own purposes. We have become cleverer and cleverer with our heads and hands and taken more and more power to ourselves as a species with every passing century and, in our time, every decade. We seek knowledge of space, earth, atom, self to secure our survival. We speak of progress and development for humanity rather than the world because we have lost our place in the world we share with all living things. Seen in his environment man is a disturber, out of harmony with the processes which maintain and extend life as a whole. He imposes his own ideas upon life at many points but if we see life as a whole we cannot be impressed by the consequences.

There are grounds for pessimism about humanity seen from this standpoint. Our mistakes seem to be many and are sometimes monumental and they derive from that quality of intelligence which most people think of as the unique endowment of our species. Recognising the failures we may argue that man is still a child in the world with time to grow, but man who is both sustainer and destroyer may be depriving himself of time to grow by choosing more and more to sustain his own life by destroying the life around him. To find grounds for optimism about humanity we have to look at the achievements which run against the general trend of human development; the thoughts and deeds which show us human powers of goodness, wisdom, co-operation, humility and love. This too is

part of our story as a race; written into the record of life as works of art, deeds of altruism and heroism, words of truth, relationships of love. Human beings have found and developed and expressed qualities which tell us that we are potentially fit to find a useful, peaceful, contributing place in the life of the world, finding ourselves more in harmony with the life processes as a whole and, as a result, more at peace in our own household of humanity.

The unanswerable question, and therefore, the uncertainty with which we must all live, is whether humanity has come so far along a wrong road that there is now neither time nor power to turn aside or turn back. The question belongs to such a large and long-term process that we can only ask it and then, answerless, make our choice between calm and optimistic or desperate and pessimistic living. The religious man will live optimistically by faith and hope and love, for his religion is the truth by which he feels compelled to live and the strength by which he feels sustained in that adventure.

WHAT GOD, IF GOD IS?

Man as a thinking, feeling, imaginative, moral creature is man the religious being, the maker or discoverer of gods or God. I believe in God because I was socially conditioned to do so by my upbringing, because there is that in my own nature to encourage or require such belief, and because, having found God, or been found by God, I have no choice but to believe in that presence and power. My experience tells me that the God of whom I am aware and on whom I depend is in the life process and within the self as a spirit and power with its own reality, not dependent upon my thought or belief or response for its being. This divine spirit has the power to influence the lives of men but not against their wills. Where the presence and power of God is recognised and accepted it works strongly, for good, in the lives of individuals and society; where it is not accepted its work is hampered and perhaps prevented; but its existence is not thereby terminated. My experience tells me that a two-way relationship can be made between human and divine and that to live in awareness of this God is better for me than to live in unawareness.

My reason tells me that it is difficult to place this kind of God in the world or universe as now understood, but now that we have been shown that the life process of which we are part rests upon ultimate particles of matter which are not solid but rather waves of energy or power, old distinctions between material and spiritual seem to be unnecessary. It is not possible to prove the existence of God-the-spirit within the life process but I find no intellectual knowledge which disallows the possibility or probability of that to which countless people have testified out of their inner experience and demonstrated by the quality of their outward lives.

I cannot move by reason or experience from my own awareness of God to the view that this holy spirit is creator or governor of the universe and therefore I look to the scientific explanations for my knowledge of the world and man's place in it. But I infer that the God who is a spirit of truth and beauty and love with power to touch and change human lives and society is likely to be present and active elsewhere in the life process; and therefore I am prepared to believe in the power of God in the life of animals and plants but I have not tried to understand how this happens. My reason bids me consider seriously the arguments from anthropology and psychology that we make gods in our own image to supply our own needs. The part which our needs play in shaping our descriptions of God cannot be denied. Downtrodden folk find a saviour God while affluent western liberals find a friend and claim to be his fellow-worker. The weak find a God who protects; the strong find a God who challenges. Hinduism teaches how by different paths, people of different natures meet God as truth or righteousness or love. To recognise how we find in the divine spirit what we most need does not show us any proof that we invent gods or God.

I believe that God is there to be found by human beings in collective and individual experience when hearts and minds are open to the possibility of such discovery or revelation. When God is found — or finds us — the relationship or contact thus made lasts for ever. Adoption of a particular idea of God in the mind does not and need not last for ever, but the sense of the presence of God in this life and this self, once gained is never lost; even though we turn away for selfish reasons sometimes or seem to reason God out of existence when we succumb to the idea that we humans are the cleverest of beings.

I believe that the God who is, is a spirit and power of truth and beauty and love within the life process and within the human self; the working of which can be felt in our own lives and seen in human history, and inferred, if not seen, elsewhere in the life process. This God is a living god, an active god, a power greater than ourselves of whom we can speak in many ways, more poetic than scientific, out of feelings of thankfulness and wonder. It is important to be clear at all times about the difference between what God is and what we say, imperfectly, about him. We human beings need to find a cornerstone for our understanding and endeavours in the development of ourselves and our kind in this life in this world. God, the indwelling spirit is there to be that cornerstone if we will have it so in faith and humility.

PURPOSE AND DESTINY

In the development of ourselves and our kind in this life in this world, two fundamental questions confront us sooner or later, or frequently perhaps;

the question of purpose and the question of destiny. If we accept the evolutionary character of life as a whole and the development of humanity as a part of that process, we have to accept the presence of failure and imperfection in every part of life, as well as success and fulfilment. We will also see that life contains endless variations of life-styles and capacities and that human life shows the same diversity. We may be willing to conclude from learning and observation that, while the nature of the life-process does not require perfection from every part, nevertheless there is an impulse towards success or perfection to be seen in many elements of the living world. We know something of this impulse in ourselves. We can discern how life proceeds in cyclical patterns by co-operative action but that it also contains clashes and conflicts. Above all, we see in the life process growth and decay, death and renewal, endlessly repeated; but with minute changes which are the small, slow steps of development in the process as a whole. Seen only in its separate episodes and parts, life often seems pointless and tragic; but when we see life in a larger span of time or space we can believe in the majesty of its power to renew itself and the patient certainty of its development. Here we may see a kind of purpose and a suggestion of destiny, far ahead if time is linear, or many times later if time is circular.

It is our human condition that we can see all this and reason about it and feel our loneliness as individuals and as a species. We need sharper answers for ourselves to the questions of purpose and destiny. We must find them in this living, changing, renewing world, and we need to relate them to the presence of God in the world and self. We have to come to terms also with the imperfections of human life in nations, in communities, in ourselves.

In the degree to which we think and feel that we belong to the present time and the visible world, we can see our growing up and learning and living as meant to help us to be at home in the world and in the human family. To be happy seems a superficial life-purpose, but if it can be taken to mean living harmoniously with our own self, our fellow human beings, and the life around us, it is a legitimate and worthwhile aim. But we have to ask ourselves if we can achieve the good life alone, without, or at the expense of, the good life for all. The answer must be in the negative and then we are led, in my view, to the task of developing our own lives to their fullest degree, not simply for our own satisfaction but so that we can play our full part in the life of humanity and the life of the world. This notion of the purpose of life takes on a full-rounded quality when related to the belief that God as a spirit and power of truth and beauty and love is in the life-process and within the self. Maturity in the individual is helped by our participation in the whole of life at the points where our life touches the whole; but we are, in imperfection, channels of the divine

power in this life and, thus strengthened and used, we make our own unique contribution in full to the life of humanity and the world in which man has a place.

Seen in this way, purpose and destiny are joined and applied to this life and this world. If there is a need to think of rewards at the end, they will be found in our own awareness that we have done our personal best, whatever it was, and thus have helped our race to do its best in our tiny moment of time in the world. If there is a need to think of our fate after death, it can be seen as bound up with this life; all of us, body, mind and spirit, thoughts, words, feelings and deeds, having passed into the common life of humanity and the world while we lived, to be made one with that life and part of its continuity. One human life-time is such a small thing in the totality of existence and yet so large an experience for that one person. We need to feel that our life is significant, and we can feel that if we accept that we have a place in space and time which no other can fill and the opportunity to be a channel of divine truth and beauty and love in this continuing life and world. Whether we are weak or strong, wise or foolish, young or old, this purpose and this destiny are there for each of us.

GOOD AND EVIL

One characteristic of life in this world which many find perplexing is the presence of both good and evil, joy and suffering. These opposites are a part of life and part of the experience of us all and what we meet are not only unavoidable variations and conflicts in the quality of life but also manufactured differences and injustices; natural circumstances on the one hand and human behaviour on the other. I see the pleasure and pain, joy and suffering in the natural world as belonging to the life-process and issuing forth from it and therefore not in any sense the choice or responsibility of God. We can take away the words good and evil from this scene as bearing suggestions of morality which are not applicable to it. That leaves us to bear life as we meet it, but, being human, we have some power to control experience and to learn from it. We have some power to promote good or evil, to create pleasure or pain, to win joy or suffering; but we often lack the wisdom to use that power perfectly, and therefore do not always achieve the results we intend.

In this life all of us will meet joy and suffering, all of us will take decisions about right and wrong and act upon them. We may cause suffering or do evil to another or others, unintentionally, or perhaps deliberately because of some evil or suffering in ourself. We may also give joy and do good and our motives in these situations will often be mixed or unclear to us. Suffering may come to us from the natural world without human agency and all we can do is to live through it and understand it. We may receive evil or suffering from other people. Whether it be intentional or unin-

tentional, we have to learn how to cope with it so that, if possible, some good comes out of it or, at least, no added harm or suffering results for others or for us. We may also meet in this life the perils of joy and pleasure and doing good, and we need wisdom to cope with these so that joy does not become suffering nor pleasure turn to pain.

If we can bring to our consideration of these formidable aspects of living a belief in God, we have both a clear indication of a path to follow through labyrinthine experiences and an assurance of continuing help in so doing. To feel the presence of a divine power in this life which we identify with visions or ideals of truth and beauty and love, is to confront whatever life brings with some certainties about what is possible and what is desirable. Faced with storms, earthquakes and floods, for example, there is no crying out to an omnipotent, governing deity to take it all back and restore life to what it was. Instead, there is acceptance of that which cannot be changed and the will to change what can be changed by bringing into the situation, however tragic, as much of truth and beauty and love as we can find in ourselves, in others and in the situation itself.

Faced with the strengths and weaknesses of our own nature, in situations of human togetherness or loneliness, we find through our sense of the divine presence and power the impulse to be the best we can be, and while we do not always succeed in that, we are more likely to be honest and kind than false and cruel, because we have a means of recognising with some confidence the good thoughts and deeds rather than the evil ones, and some added will to pursue them. Faced with the troubles which come upon us we will not cry out to God to take them away or to punish those who have brought them upon us, and we will certainly not revile or reject God as though blame and failure lie there. If we can feel the presence of a divine power of truth and beauty and love in ourselves and in life around us, we will put our trust there and find or receive the wisdom and strength to bear what must be borne and to overcome what can be overcome. Faced with the shortcomings of human society, the wars and cruelties and injustices which we inflict upon one another, we will not blame a distant God or demand a miracle but, in awareness of a present power within the life-process, we will find hope of better things, forgiveness for people if not their deeds, shame for our own failures in the common life, patience to bear what cannot be changed and strength to work to change what can.

INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY

Human society is a comfort and a cross for us as individuals. We cannot live without it but we cannot make it work as we want to and we cannot abandon hope of its perfectibility. We need to live together in society but we often feel ourselves dominated by it, as if we have made a monster

or machine but no longer control it. So necessary to us is the corporate life of society that we will do a great deal to secure our place in it. On the other hand, we are self-conscious unique individuals with an equal need to express our independence and preserve our individuality. Although we fly from our aloneness into the togetherness of society, we are not willing to be totally absorbed into the group, of whatever size. The coming together of human beings in groups is both co-operative and competitive; the need which it meets is counterbalanced by the need to be alone and individual. There is bound to be tension between the individual and the community; varying in intensity according to how strong a sense of our own selfhood we have and how strong a claim society makes upon us.

For the religious individual life in society, especially the society of today, presents continuing problems and challenges. Like everyone else, the man of faith has his own need of the human community and he will find himself conforming to the common life at many points, partly from the need to be accepted and contained in that life, and partly from the conditioning we all receive in our growing up and our daily involvement in the community. Through family life and work and social interests and even church membership we invest more and more of ourselves in society as it is and come to accept the conditions and values which belong to it. But within that life and church and within ourselves is hidden that divine spirit and power which indicates or represents or embodies those standards and visions of truth and beauty and goodness which satisfy us in the depths of our feelings and the heights of our minds. In most generations, and certainly in ours, there is an undoubted conflict between, let us call it, the life of the spirit and the life of the world. We may escape it by turning away from the life of the spirit and settling for the lesser life of the world, but we will have to live and die in the knowledge that we have given less than our full part to the ongoing life of all.

If we choose to try to live in the world as people of faith, as in the presence of God, we have thorny problems to solve and narrow paths to follow. It used to be easy to say (and some still say it) that the religious life can be reduced to the two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbour as ourself. But even in a large city, let alone a nation, or a world which is now called a global village, it is not always easy to determine who is our most needy neighbour or, if we can find him, what it means to love him in our modern situation. While we live with a vision of truth and beauty and goodness we have to make many particular and hard choices to relate that vision to the life of man in the world, and bound up with many situations of choice are necessary compromises also. Will we serve God in the world through the church or through other agencies? Will we serve desperate material needs as benefactors to the hungry or as patient and humble teachers helping others to help them-

selves? Is it more important to meet material or spiritual needs in the world, or feed bodies or minds? Faced with world problems and neighbourhood shortcomings, where does our duty lie? Can we accept and use the present economic and political system or should we work to replace it with another? Will we bring up our children to accept this society, or encourage them to become the revolutionaries who will overthrow it and us? To live with faith in the world today is not comfortable or easy but if we can sustain our commitment and communion with the divine, we have help in choosing right paths to follow and resources of courage and will to follow them. There is comfort also to be had in the knowledge that in being true to God and ourself we are also being true to the life of mankind and the wider world to which it belongs.

INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION

If you believe, as I do, that man himself is a meeting place of the human and the divine and that man creates his forms of society, there is no room for believing that religious institutions such as churches are divine creations. Belief about organised religion then starts from the recognition of human needs and, specifically, human needs in relation to the religious life, life with God. If, as Unitarians, we believe that a man's faith is his own to find and keep and practise, we may reasonably ask why we build and maintain our forms of institutional religion; churches, fellowships, associations and assemblies. The short answer is: because we need them; and the specific purposes for which we need them appear to be for belonging, for learning, for celebrating, for caring, for proclaiming and for discipline.

For all that we are individuals using our own heads and hearts to seek and find values and inspiration by which to live; jealous to guard our personal freedom and our direct access to the divine; we are like everyone else in needing one another. Our chief reason for coming together in churches or other religious organisations is to belong, to identify ourselves with a group of like-minded people. We need this association for comfort and strength, but having made it, we go on to use what we have made for other needs and purposes. As free-thinking people trusting our own consciences, we need continuing educational opportunities, be they sermons, discussions or conversations, to clarify, sustain and perhaps extend our faith and understanding. As religious people we need, like everyone else, shared occasions and ceremonies to mark birth, marriage and death, the seasons of the year, the great events of urban life, and the traditional Christian festivals so familiar to us. Worship as the celebration of life is a good definition of our need if not an accurate description of what we usually do in our churches. It has been commonly assumed that it is for worship that we come together, build churches, create organisations; but

there is much evidence to suggest that worship no longer has first place, either because it has lost its meaning or because needs other than the need to worship demand to be satisfied.

Leaving worship unexamined at this stage, we need our organised religious life to provide care for one another within the shared terms of our faith. We need the care and companionship of one another at many points in our lives, with a measure of understanding which those with beliefs very different to our own will not be able to supply. The vision of the church as a caring community is well-founded but not always well realised when faith does not match the vision. But we live our lives in society as well as in personal relationships, and organised religion provides for the proclamation of values in word and deed in society as a whole. We need this collective power to translate our ideals for humanity into realities. From the preaching in worship the word may go forth directly or indirectly. From shared feelings, thoughts and discussions action may arise from a church-based group or church people working in other groups in society.

The final individual need which I see as being provided for by organised religion is that of discipline; especially necessary if in religion we choose the path of individual freedom. Being together in a church requires us to relate our personal beliefs to existing traditions and to express our faith in the shared and inherited forms of thought and language. Being in a church requires us to practise the tolerance which we cherish as a basic principle in religion. By belonging to a congregation and a movement we commit ourselves to relationships with others in which caring and being cared for will have a central place. Joining with others to act together in society in the name of or, through, the church disciplines us to the practical service of others.

When we lose sight of these purposes and make the church an end in itself it has little value for man and God. When we commit ourselves to make our institutions meet and express these human needs to belong, to learn, to celebrate, to care, to proclaim and to discipline ourselves, then these institutions become channels of divine truth and beauty and love and may be called houses of God.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Whatever may be the state of our religious institutions today, we human beings are worshipping creatures with needs to look up, to praise, to give thanks, to rejoice and to confess our failures. Worship as a collective ritual event has been present, and often central, in human life from its beginning, as man's response to the immensity, complexity and mystery of life and the presence in it of God or gods. Changing circumstances have not lessened or removed our need to worship but some failure in our time in the triangular relationship of our need, our beliefs and our patterns of

worship deprives many, even in churches, of worship events equal to their needs.

If God, the divine power, is in the life-process as I believe, and our true life is life lived in awareness of, dependence upon and loyalty to that divine reality, worship means the worship of God in this life. This is not "the celebration of life" as though everything in life is to be celebrated in worship. It is the celebration of that of God in life, or the celebration of life in its godlikeness. This kind of worship will celebrate every manifestation of truth and beauty and goodness visible to us in this life, and every impulse towards, and yearning after, these qualities or ideals, seen in people and events. This worship will take into its forms of celebration truth and beauty and goodness as found in people, in society, in the church itself, in the world of nature. It will pay homage to and give thanks for discoveries, recoveries, creations and achievements of truth and beauty and love, as showings of the divine in humanity and the world

Such worship will call upon whatever means can be found in this life to do justice to these high things; words, music, visual arts and the art of movement; things from the past and the present and hopes for the future. To create and carry through worship of this kind in a collective, public way requires a measure of organisation, discipline, tolerance and agreement not needed in private devotions. Public worship needs its own place, be it church, temple, home or hall; and its appointed time such as Sunday morning or Wednesday night. It needs also skilled organisation and leadership especially today when knowledge is widely spread but faith is uncertain, and great gaps between belief, experience and worship need to be constantly bridged.

It cannot be argued as strongly as I have asserted his need to worship that man has a central need to pray. It is true that man has prayed for all of his recorded history but it has always been an activity related to belief in God or gods. Prayer is communication with the divine spirit and power, and its form and content are shaped by the understanding and awareness of the divine of him who prays. If God is present with us in the life-process as a living active power, our prayers will express our yearning to live in that presence, thankfulness when we are doing so, repentance when we turn or fall away, rejoicing for all the good which flows through life and through us. Our prayer will be waiting as well as speaking when it is communication with a living power of truth and beauty and love; and when prayer is asking, as it will sometimes be, it will ask chiefly for more godlikeness in life and in ourselves. Prayer may be intercession for others but without any expectation that God will respond with miraculous action defying the life-process. What can we expect from such prayer that might be called answers? There will be increments of comfort and strength when we need them, and illumination of the concerns and needs

we have brought into our prayers. Above all, there will be a clearer, stronger sense of the divine presence within and around us. That much is certain, even predictable; but there may also be something mysterious, unexpected, which will feel like a grace or a blessing.

There is space in our experience for worship and prayer, both public and private; the worship meeting a universal human need and the prayer an added part of the life of those who live close to the divine or yearn to do so. Worship and prayer honour the divine presence in life as well as serving our needs. They are, whatever the shortcomings of churches and despite the rejections of many, still the chief means of sustenance and development for man as a religious being in a spiritual world.

RELIGION AND RELIGIONS

Any view of religion which looks beyond the beliefs and practices of any one tradition, and especially one revelation, must find an explanation of the diversity and multiplicity of religions observable in human life and experience. Those who do not look far may be able to believe that their own religion is true while others are merely forerunners or approximations of it; but a more open mind will find a less partisan standpoint.

In different places and generations men will differ in their awareness of God and each attempt to acknowledge and describe the presence of the divine will be made through the thought, language and social usages of a particular local, regional or national group. Each organised religion will have not only its own beliefs and rules; its worship and architecture and symbolism and organisation will reflect the society in which they are created. But religions grow out of existing ones and carry on altered forms and patterns in new settings. We can see how Christianity grew out of Judaism, Buddhist out of Hinduism, and how Islam was built upon Judaism and Christianity, and the Sikh religion upon Hinduism and Islam. Protestantism out of Catholicism and Pentacostalism out of Protestantism in the Christian world; and Unitarianism growing out of Christianity in comparatively recent times.

Much human activity surrounds the formation of different religions and because we are imperfect creatures, that which begins as an attempt to express the absolute truth and beauty and love of God becomes, inevitably, an imperfect manifestation of it. When men think that their vision has been perfectly translated into doctrine and practices, they claim perfection and finality for their religion; but bigotry and persecution follow such a claim and that leads in turn to the recognition by some of the imperfection of that religion and an effort is made to recover the truth by reforming the old faith or founding a new religion. The power of tradition is so strong and the influence of social usages so pervasive in religion, as in life as a whole, that new departures in religion do not usually move far

from their starting point, and most people will live their lives within, or close to, the religion of their parents. They will find it easier to reject that tradition and be without any, than to take up some other, widely different, faith.

Liberal religion, such as Unitarianism, is a new form of organised religion arising slowly out of traditional Christianity. It dares to try to embrace the presence in life of many different religions, many claims to a revelation from God, rising capacities of understanding in human beings and ever widening knowledge, and the continuing presence of the divine spirit in the world and in ourselves. We have chosen a new way in religion which rejects the possibility of an exclusive and final revelation of God, but embraces the reality of a continuing discovery and revelation of the divine within this life and within ourselves.

Our starting point has been in Christianity and therefore the expression of our faith has been primarily in Christian terms; but for this new religion to establish itself as new, and serve man in the modern world as well as it can, it will have to go beyond Christianity and, in full awareness of all the religions of man and every kind of knowledge, be willing to find and express new patterns of belief and worship and organisation. We will not abandon all that we have inherited, but trust in that continuing process of divine revelation and human discovery working among individuals bound together in tolerance and freedom in one religious movement, to carry us forward. Our great temptations are, on the one hand, to be afraid to move beyond Christianity; and, on the other hand, to forget the unity of the divine spirit of truth and beauty and love among all the diversities of religion and irreligion which confront us.

We know that religions are many and that God is one; and we ought not to forget that it is our task as individuals and as a new religion to prove the merits of diversity in manifesting the oneness of God.

JESUS, THE MAN

To believe in God as a spirit and power within the life-process, as I do, is to free Jesus from his unique place in Christian thought and bring him closer to us as a man in whom the divine found powerful expression. He was born, as we are, of man and woman, but later men, believing him to be marvellous, wove marvellous stories around his conception and birth. We know that he grew up in a family in the Jewish religion and apparently became obsessively interested in religion before reaching manhood. He appeared on the adult scene in his own time as a God-centred man who placed his trust in his own direct perception of the divine rather than in the traditional Jewish teachings. When these two things conflicted, he became a nonconformist in the eyes of the faithful, and he began to speak

out of his own understanding in a way which brought him a few followers on the one hand and the hostility of organised Jewish religion on the other.

We read of his speaking in the synagogue and surprising and shocking his hearers; but we are told more of his going about doing good and preaching repentance and the day of judgment. Doing good may mean simple human loving-kindness and concern for others, but he may have had some added power to help and heal arising from his deep spirituality. His teachings were moral and spiritual, and because they were related to the expectation that the day of judgment was imminent, they have an urgency and absoluteness and simplicity which has made them endlessly challenging to generations not sharing his belief about the end of the world. There are universal qualities to be found in the life and teachings of Jesus, but he was a man of his own time and not all that he said and did is applicable to later generations. When we have the freedom to do so, it is important to pick our way carefully among the problems of the nature of the man, the authenticity of the records of his life and teachings, and the interpretations incorporated into those records by his first followers and greatly added to by later generations.

When Jesus died on a cross his death was like that of others in those days, but his approach to his death was notably different. He held to his own understanding of the truth and his belief that he was being led by God, in the face of mockery, cruelty and death; and died, therefore, as a courageous martyr for his own faith. His life was short in terms of years and, on the face of it, unsuccessful; but he had become in little more than thirty years, a mystic, a teacher, a prophet, a good man and a martyr. Some will argue from this that he must have been unique or must have been God come down to earth; but these assumptions or conclusions are not necessary or justified.

Jesus was a remarkably spiritual man by nature, upbringing, choice and sustained effort. There have been others like him in human history, a few as famous and many others less known and remembered. Complicated circumstances brought it about that his influence survived and led slowly to the growth of a new religion, embodying many variations and distortions of his teaching and example. By a combination of human needs, political situations, economic conditions, and traditions of personal devotion to the man Jesus and to the church founded in his name, a great world religion arose and is now declining. The process has happened to other remarkably spiritual men, and it may happen again.

If, in the life and teaching of Jesus, we are to see how God came into the world and lived among us, I can see that God is always appearing in the world and is always among us in human words and actions. The man Jesus will always be important because he shows us that possibility of living in

the presence of God fulfilled in his life, and a way of living which promises the same fulfilment to us. He is still for us today, if we need him, not a blueprint for a perfect human life, nor a complete compendium of moral and spiritual knowledge, but "a finger pointing the way". The state of the world, and of human life both social and personal, testifies eloquently that we need him or someone like him, not to worship but to follow.

STILLNESS AND ACTION

A true way of living, whether found by following Jesus or another, involves both stillness and action. When we are aware of a divine spirit in the life-process and in the self we have to be still, waiting, listening, learning, as well as act. The story of man as a religious being, as expressed in many different traditions, tells us of quietism and social reform, cultivation of self and concern for the world, prayer and good works, peace of heart and activity of mind. We can see in individuals the spirit's ebb and flow; the life of religious organisations includes both retreats and missions. Religious experience embraces philosophy and mysticism, work and worship, serving God and waiting on God, the life-styles of Martha and of Mary.

Each of us must make choices between stillness and action in the light of our nature and needs and the surrounding circumstances of our lives. There are times in human affairs when the man of God must act, act, act, with little or no rest for renewal of body and spirit; even to the point of losing his life, the man of God must sometimes respond to divine inspiration and human need with ceaseless action. At such a time it will fall to a few to suffer the condemnation of the many perhaps by choosing to follow the way of stillness, inaction; keeping open, by a quiet devotional life removed from the turmoil of the world, those channels of love between divine and human, human and divine, which the world always needs. There are times and situations in our personal lives when our faith and belief will lead to more of action than stillness or more of quiet than activity. When we are young and uncommitted to others the ways of action and devotion are equally open to us; but marriage and a career may bring a decade or two in which action will necessarily have priority over stillness and personal devotion. Later in life there is time, opportunity and need to act less and reflect more, and those who accept these priorities in old age make a good end.

Some religions formalise these possibilities and provide for their realisation, but others leave it all to chance and instinct and many people lose the way, more often coming to believe that the true life is action from beginning to end rather than devotion and quietism. It ought to be the case that within every organised religion there is provision of many kinds for both stillness and action; the church which calls the faithful to

pray also providing fields of service, and the religion which invites people to think also allowing them to be still in contemplation of the divine. But in the end, what is provided by organised religions, and indeed in the whole life of humanity, depends upon the response of individuals to the presence of the divine as a power of truth and beauty and love to be felt, known and understood in silence and stillness, as well as to be served in love.

To day “I believe” is more than to formulate the ideas which seem true to me. It means also, “I wait, I listen, I trust, I learn from that divine spirit which is at the heart of all life”. It means also, “I act, I express in living deeds, I carry through the tasks, responsibilities, ideals derived from the divine and expressed in words in such statements as this”. Religion is of the head, the heart and the hands; the whole person. Sometimes, there may be more of one than the others; but over a lifetime certainly and often in a single day or year, a man’s religion is of the whole person, head, heart and hands.

IN CONCLUSION

My last words must express my thankfulness to those with whom I share my faith; those who, Sunday by Sunday, inspire me by their presence and need to prepare beautiful worship and clear sermons; those who gave me the opportunity and challenge of this lectureship to give shape and form to my faith; and those known and unknown in past, present and future who, by sustaining this Unitarian Movement of churches, make it possible for us to speak the truth in love, in perfect freedom without fear. I believe that we are all participators together in the truth and beauty and love of God — that divine spirit and power present in the world and the self, and source of whatever knowledge, peace and service to others finds expression in our lives.

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