

# Ipswich Unitarians

## “IN WAND’RING MAZES LOST”: DEVOTION OR DEBATE?

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There is an old joke that Unitarians like to tell amongst themselves. It goes something like this. A Unitarian dies and goes up to heaven. But as he stands at the Pearly Gates, St. Peter asks him what denomination he belongs to. “I’m a Unitarian”, comes the reply. “Oh!”, says St. Peter, “well, you can come in if you like but most Unitarians prefer to go over there.” He points to a signpost just outside the gates, on which is written, “Discussions *about* heaven.”

The moral behind this joke is that we can sometimes become so interested in discussing and debating religion that we can forget to *do* religion; we can forget to *live* it as opposed to talk about it; we can forget its true purposes and become more of a discussion group than a worshipping, spiritual, community of faith. Indeed, there are Unitarian churches and fellowships where discussion not only takes place during what is billed as worship, but even replaces it. This isn’t something I have ever favoured myself. It’s not that I have anything against discussion and debate in the right context, but I have never seen it as a worshipful activity or a helpful component of a worship service.

If different voices, different perspectives, different experiences, are to be heard in worship – and there is certainly nothing wrong with that! – then they should be received and *listened* to. They should not become the subject of contention and debate, of point-scoring and one-upmanship, which is what debate usually is.

Worship is a time, not to close the mind, certainly, but rather to still it, and to encourage thought at a deeper and more reflective level than can occur at other times in our busy lives. In worship, thought is turned to transcendence and to immanence; to reflection on our own condition, our own actions, attitudes and behaviour; to the sources from which we can draw inspiration and guidance for our daily lives. The components of worship are there to free us, for an hour, from that narrow self-concern which – most of the time – directs our lives. They lift us up in praise and thanksgiving; they speak to our consciences, challenging us to live the love we profess; they comfort us in our various griefs and sorrows.

In shared worship we create a mood in which our spirits can meet with each other, and with the One Divine Spirit, in a time when separate selves become merged in wholeness and union. A mood which, we hope, can stay with us as we leave this place, to live our lives in greater consciousness of our neighbour and our neighbour’s needs.

Personally, I find that this mood is broken when the contention and egocentricity of debate invades the space set aside for worship. Even the preacher is not there to argue, but rather to witness to his or her own faith, and to offer to the congregation a spiritual reflection on some issue of either current or timeless concern. The preacher’s task – at least, in the liberal context – is to stimulate, comfort, inform and even to challenge. It is not to make dogmatic statements or to claim some special authority over the congregation.

Of course, anything the preacher says can be questioned or challenged later but not, I think, there and then! A preacher should not harangue a congregation; they must be respected. But given that this is the case, the preacher’s considered words should be afforded a considered hearing. You may, of course, disagree strongly with this – but, if so, I hope you won’t take it amiss if I ask you to tell me later!

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My point is this: that worship, like faith itself, is not about scoring points in an argument, or even about giving vent to opinions on assorted theological, philosophical, social and political issues. Worship is about spiritual connection; about the affirmation of shared values; and about how each of us can best respond to the timeless call to, “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 19: 19); “to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6: 8).

All the many intriguing (and not-so-intriguing!) subjects in the area of religious and metaphysical speculation are a sideshow compared to the question of how we can live well and lovingly as good neighbours, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, the Commonwealth of Earth. We may – or may not – enjoy discussion about the assorted abstract and speculative matters that come under such broad and elastic terms as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, but none of it really matters if our prime focus is not on *living* a faith with love as its basis – the love that is Divine.

I believe strongly that reason and intellect have a part to play in religion. Apart from anything else, they are a safeguard against unreasoning bigotry and fanaticism, against superstition and ignorance. But they are not the be-all and end-all of religion. On their own they are cold fish indeed! And yet to place debate and disputation – creatures as they are of rationality and intellectual warfare – in the place of worship and devotion; in the place of a *lived* religion of love, forgiveness and compassion, is to risk de-spiritualising our communities. They then become places of occasional interest, perhaps, but not of living *commitment* to serving – and saving – souls amidst the meaninglessness, aridity and selfishness that we see around us in our culture, sapping life of its joy.

Too often our society seems to offer the hungry human soul one of two alternatives. Either, on the one hand, a shallow obsession with triviality and self-indulgence; or, on the other, aggressive, closed-minded claims to certainty – be they religious, non-religious or anti-religious – claims that foster intolerance and contempt for those with a different point of view. We belong, hopefully, to those who offer another way: open-minded and open-hearted; rational yet spiritual; concerned to serve God in and through humanity, not *instead* of humanity; respectful and appreciative of human potential but under no illusions about human weakness, human flaws, limitations, and worse.

But if we are to offer this very distinctive and all-too-rare spiritual path, then we mustn’t forget that we *are* a spiritual community, not merely a forum for academic debate. Bearing in mind that old joke about Unitarians and ‘discussions about heaven’, it is interesting to note some lines by John Milton, the great Puritan poet of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dissent and one of our spiritual forbears. He wrote:

*Others sat on a hill retired,  
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high  
Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,  
Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute,  
And found no end, in wand’ring mazes lost.*

Does that remind you of anything? Milton continues:

*Of good and evil much they argued then,  
Of happiness and final misery,  
Passion and apathy, and glory and shame,  
Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy...*

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But this particular discussion group was neither in a Unitarian church nor just outside the Pearly Gates! It's members were fallen angels, cast out from heaven, on their way to hell – in 'Paradise Lost', of course (Book II, lines 557-565). For Milton, metaphysical debate was nothing more than “wand'ring mazes”, “vain wisdom”, and “false philosophy”; a trap on the way to something much worse!

But if this warning doesn't convince us, we could consider these words from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, written by a Unitarian named Anna Laetitia Barbauld:

*...there is nothing more prejudicial to the feelings of a devout heart than a habit of disputing on religious subjects.*

She continues:

*Free inquiry is undoubtedly necessary to establish a rational belief; but a disputatious spirit, and fondness for controversy, give the mind a sceptical turn...*

This, says Barbauld, makes it,

*...impossible to preserve that deep reverence for the Deity...when all his attributes, and even his very existence become the subject of familiar debate.*

She believed in “candour” and “freedom of speech”, but feared the whole point was lost, “in the heat of discourse” and of “careless expression”. We may search for truth in our religious life, but we shouldn't allow that search to degenerate into argument for the sake of it. As Anna Laetitia Barbauld puts it herself:

*The spirit of inquiry is easily distinguished from the spirit of disputation.*

Our goal should be living our religion, not for ever discussing it! Barbauld's sound advice is as valuable now as it was in her own time. With typically Barbauldesque irony, she writes:

*Whoever...is so unfortunate as not to have settled his opinions in important points will proceed in the search for truth with deep humility, unaffected earnestness, and a serious attention to every argument that may be offered.*

But ultimately, what matters is what sort of person our religion makes of us. “Too critical a spirit”, says Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “is the bane of everything great or pathetic” (meaning, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evocative of pity and kindly feeling). Nevertheless, we should not be unthinking. As she puts it:

*In our creeds let us be guarded, let us there weigh every syllable...*

But in more personal devotion something more is needed than coldly rational evaluation. She continues:

*...but in compositions addressed to the heart, let us give freer scope to the language of the affections...*

Our faith, then - and our worship - is really about what sort of person it makes us. It is not even just “the language of the affections” to which our devotions should give “freer scope”, it is also, she says,

*...to...the overflowing of a warm and generous disposition.*

May it be so!

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*Barbauld extracts from her, 'Thoughts on the Devotional Taste, on Sects, and on Establishments' (1775, 1792).*