

A Home For My Spirit When It Was Homeless

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The religious atmosphere of the family in which I was nurtured, and of the churches that I attended, now seems to me resonant, in many ways, of English Christianity in the early 1800s, 200 years ago. Religious belief was taken very seriously, doubt was a sin, and those lively minds who did finally reject the old belief systems found the process traumatic. To the trauma of abandoning a way of thinking that had become deeply part of them was often added the trauma of parting ways with a community to which they had been strongly committed. I, from my own experience, feel a strong sense of kinship with those 19th C figures who found the dogmatic Christian belief system in which they had been nurtured too much of a prison of the mind.

Unitarian churches were, in many or most places just as orthodox as the rest, albeit they did reject a few orthodox doctrines. The old is rejected, but the new hardens all too easily into a new orthodoxy. Even without a creed, the freedom of belief that we in Unitarian and UU churches enjoy today was not always a feature of the Unitarian movement. There were, in the 19th C and later, some hard-fought controversies that led up to this point. Ultimately, it came to be accepted that once that process of challenge has started, it is impossible, in advance, to set limits to that process, to say where it might stop.

The experience of loss of faith, or as I prefer breaking of the old mental shackles, was the experience of some who grew up in the Unitarian churches of their time. Some very famous names, whom we too casually claim as Unitarians, are among them. Charles Darwin is one such person. Harriet Martineau, whom I will talk about shortly, is another.

Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution dramatically changed thinking. Its ramifications in philosophy and science continue to be explored, in ways that affect our view of ourselves and of society. There are huge implications for the way that we think about economic issues.

Charles Darwin initially set out to train as a doctor. He did in the process develop a passion for the study of living things, to the extent of neglecting his medical studies. When it became clear that medicine would not be his suit, Darwin's father suggested theological training, with a view to becoming a country parson — a career path that fitted well with the study of nature as a sideline. Darwin fell in with this. Darwin studied the 39 Articles to which he had to give assent, decided that he could accept them, and entered theological training at Cambridge University. Three years later, schooled both in theology and nature, he was set to become an Anglican parson. He accepted relatively traditional Christian views — on the authority of the Bible, the nature of God, and so on.

Then it happened that Darwin was invited to join what became a 5-year journey of exploration to remote parts of the world, including NZ. Out of his scientific investigations on that journey emerged, some years later, his evolutionary theory. All life, humans included, is descended from one or a small number of common ancestors. Darwin became the most famous scientist of his day.

His religious views changed also. Charles Darwin never allowed these to become public, not in England at least. The change was traumatic, as documented in the major 1991 biography. “Darwin, the Life of a Tormented Evolutionist”.

There was one rare exception to Darwin’s policy of keeping his religious views to himself. Francis Abbott from the Free Religious Association in the USA sent Darwin their “Tracts for Our Times” pamphlet. The FRA was a ginger group in the United States, largely made up of Unitarians and ex-Unitarians who found the Unitarian movement of their day too confining. As one scholar describes it, the Free Religious Association

. . . welded the humanistic revolt against Christianity into a single movement based on individual freedom of belief, the scientific study of religion, and the conviction that a single, universal spirit underlay all historic faiths . . .

The 50th of the 50 affirmations said:

Christianity is the faith of the soul’s childhood; Free Religion is the faith of the soul’s manhood.

I agree with almost every word, said Charles, allowed them to publish this in their magazine and supported them financially. He had found in the Free Religious Association a home for his religious spirit.

Another story that resonates with me is that of Harriet Martineau, born in 1802. She was an amazing person — journalist, social activist, translator of major European academic works, major player in intellectual life. She grew up surrounded by Unitarian Christian influences. She largely accepted the ethical and doctrinal demands that were pressed on her, albeit struggling to make sense of them. Speaking of her experience as an 18-year old visiting the Unitarian chapel at Norwich, she says of the influence of the minister:

As for me, his devout and devoted Catechumen, he made me desperately superstitious, —living wholly in and for religion and fiercely fanatical about it.

I wonder, does Clay have that effect on his young listeners?

For Harriet, writing when she was nearly 30, the essential Christian doctrines were:

- I. The strict Unity of God.
- II. The unlimited nature of the Redemption by Christ.
- III. The existence of a Future State.

By her late-40s, she had grown to be very critical of the Unitarian religion of her day, and to largely reject Christian belief:

“ . . . the shallow scholarship of the Unitarians made its own choice what to receive and what to reject, without perceiving that such a process was incompatible with the conception of the Scriptures being the record of a divine revelation at all”

She rejected belief in the Christian scheme of sin and redemption and life after death:

It is not “another life” that people desire and expect, but the same life in another place. The belief was no doubt of use in its proper day, like every general belief, but its proper date is past . . .

The God in which she continued to believe was not the God of Christian theology. Those old ideas were for her dead. This was not for her a loss. Rather it was a liberating experience, a breaking of the old shackles:

We are healthier in mind, higher in views and conduct, and happier in life and the prospect of death, than we were before.

Harriet would I think have said “Amen” to words from a sermon that Lloyd Geering delivered at Victoria University in 1965. It was one of several articles and talks that started a furious controversy, and led to a heresy trial. I listened to Lloyd read it again this last week at St Andrews Church, revisiting those controversies.

We humans are always trying to find security in systems and doctrines, for they have the effect of delivering us from the necessity of facing our true human predicament, which is that we do not know for certain who we are or where we are going. There is no infallible body of knowledge which gives us all the answers. God remains for ever hidden from sight, and (as it says in the book of Ecclesiastes) “we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end”.

In her personal relationships, and in her relationship with the Unitarian movement, the effects were traumatic. She had been close to her younger brother James, by this time a leading Unitarian theologian. When she helped publish a collection of letters that gave expression to her views, James wrote a highly critical, scathing, review. This led to a breach with her brother, and ended her relationship with the Unitarian movement.

There is irony in James Martineau’s break with his sister. His first book argued that the final source of authority in religion was, and had to be, the mind and conscience of the individual. Not the Pope, not Scripture, not Church tradition could be a substitute for individual judgement. He described the New Testament as “uninspired, but truthful; sincere, able, vigorous, but fallible.” He resisted the efforts of those of unitarian belief to organise themselves into a Unitarian movement. He argued that the use of the name ‘Unitarian’, even without any form of credal statement, would have the effect of stifling needed change. Religious organisations have sufficient natural resistance to change, he argued, without the adding of further such obstacles.

What then was wrong with the views that his sister had formed? Change was in principle OK, but he insisted that it remain within the Christian tradition as he understood and wished to use that tradition. “Why stop there”, Harriet was in effect asking. What is the logic of that?

Belief statements about God and another world of existence speak of a world that lies outside of human experience. When believers speak of that world, they use the language of symbol, with the symbols taken from the world that they know. It is inevitable that different people, in a different time and place, will understand those symbols differently. Those old symbols do not and cannot mean the same today as they meant in earlier centuries.

The tension between James and Harriet would be a continuing tension within the Unitarian movements, both in the United Kingdom and in North America. At least in the United States, the ideas and outlook of the Free Religious Association did finally gain a foothold. Harriet Martineau and Charles Darwin would, I think, have strongly approved of the Principles and Purposes of the UUA. They set the scene for the major part of today's movement, in Australia and NZ as elsewhere.

Where did this church sit in those old controversies? Largely, I think, William Jellie who was its first minister set the tone. In the church calendar for July 1900, Minister William Jellie wrote:

In starting a new church it is very necessary to remove misconceptions, and to show how very far removed we are from those ordinary ideas that have alienated so many from all that Worship and Religion stand for.

A reasonable guess is that creeds — doctrinal standards — were one part of those ordinary ideas.

New Zealand short story writer Frank Sargeson attended this church as a young man, very likely in 1926-27. He wrote about that time:

When I was a young man I used to go the Unitarian church. In those days it was the thing for quite a number of young men to go to the Unitarian church. It was a way of letting people know that they had grown up and had independent minds.

This was indeed, for those young men, a church that was far removed from those ordinary ideas of which Jellie spoke. This was a place where young people could work through the great questions of life and meaning, with no concern that they might reach conclusions that would cut them off from the community. It was a different kind of church.

My religious journey has strong points of connection with Darwin's journey. I came to this church in 1984 in search of a place where I had freedom of belief and understanding, without the worry that I might stray beyond the limits of right belief. This church was, largely, the place where I completed the journey into the sorts of views that I hold now. I soon found myself speaking from time to time on a Sunday morning — that forced some hard thinking.

In the face of uncertainty, we must each find our own path ahead. Harriet Martineau's religious journey, or my religious journey, is not the path that everyone will follow. Beliefs do matter, but chiefly as they lead on to strong ethical commitments. What matters is that all work together for the common good, irrespective of inevitable differences in religious or

political commitment. This is what happens in the wider society. It is what ought to happen, much more than it does, in the international arena.

All freedom comes with a responsibility to use it wisely. Our belief commitments should be informed and reasoned. Gut feeling, blind following of the views of others, is not enough.

For 11 years from 1958 to 1969, Nancy Fox was the driving force behind the NZ Unitarian Association publication 'Motive'. I knew her as a member of this church. I will finish with her comments about what this church meant to her:

As institutions and organisations, not just churches . . . the people who run them, unless they are constantly renewed with fresh blood, become less flexible, less able to meet change constructively, more likely to appeal to the letter instead of the spirit, and to fall back on precedent. . .

I have been a Unitarian for twenty-five years. This church was a home for my spirit when it was homeless. . . . But over the years I have seen successive waves of innovative newcomers come and fall away, because they were not made welcome, they were sometimes actively discouraged. I have seen successive ministers beating their heads against negative attitudes . . .

[Auckland Unitarian Church: News and Views for December 1979]

That is exactly how I see the challenge of this church for the future, to set in train a continuing process of change that will keep it equipped for and sensitive to the needs of new generations. The freedom that this church offers to lively minds is a precious gift. The challenge is to use that freedom well, as individuals and as a church.

Notes and Links

For an account of the way that Darwin's world view changed, see "Darwin, the Life of a Tormented Evolutionist", Adrian Desmond and James Moore. W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

"'Till The Peoples All Are One' Darwin's Unitarian Connections", Clifford M Reed, Lindsey Press, 2011.

See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_Charles_Darwin

On changes in Harriet Martineau's thinking and outlook, see:

"Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), from Unitarianism to Agnosticism",

Odile Boucher-Rivalain <https://cve.revues.org/520>

Darwin's wife seems always to have maintained her unitarian Christian beliefs. See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Darwin

Side thoughts

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus argued that you cannot dip your feet in the same stream twice. When you again dip your feet, it is not the same stream. The water has flowed on.

It is somewhat like that with creeds. The world view that gives them meaning has changed. The attempt to maintain old beliefs will merely cut off from the community many, with lively minds and a strong sense of moral purpose, who cannot or who can no longer go along with the old modes of thought. This happened in the 19th C, not just in mainstream Christianity, but also in Unitarian churches.

So it is also with churches. This church was formed out of the Unitarian tradition. Is it the same church that it was when it was founded in 1898? Yes, and no. As with the stream that flows on, there is change, and there is continuity.

The people are different. The clothes that people wear are different. The hymns are different. What those who attend believe, about God, about another world of being in which God dwells, about how the world came into existence, and about religious authority, are different, and today probably much more varied than 117 years ago. Yet there is an important sense in which this is the same church. It wrestles with questions were central to the Jewish and Christian traditions — questions of life and death and meaning and how we ought to live.