

# **A RATIONAL FAITH**

## **HUMANISM, ENLIGHTENMENT IDEALS, AND UNITARIANISM**

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As a former president of both the Humanist Society of New South Wales and the Council of Australian Humanist Societies, and as someone who identifies as a Humanist in his values and thinking, I am very pleased to be here today, and to speak to you for a while.

I want to talk to you this afternoon about the influence Humanism, itself infused *by* and *with* Enlightenment values and ideals, has had on liberal religion in the form of Unitarianism.<sup>1</sup> You may or may not be aware that Humanism has had a considerable influence on Christian thinking---to the satisfaction of progressive Christians and to the regret and consternation of Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists. I want to focus on just one progressive religious movement with which I have been closely associated for some time now, namely Unitarianism, and show how Humanism helped turn Unitarianism from what was essentially a denomination which moved within the orbit of Christianity---whilst rejecting a couple of what many mainstream Christians would regard as key Christian doctrines---to what could be called a post-Christian *metareligion* ... or perhaps not even a religion at all.

The Unitarian Church---in reality, there is no 'Unitarian Church' as such but only 'Unitarian churches'<sup>2</sup>---is very much a church of the Enlightenment infused by the

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, a Unitarian was a religious person whose ethic derived primarily from Jesus, who believed in one God as a single entity (as opposed to a triune God), and whose philosophy of faith and life was founded upon the principles of freedom, reason and tolerance. For some time now, Unitarianism has included members, adherents, and 'fellow travellers' holding a very broad spectrum of beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> Most Unitarian churches throughout the world have adopted a congregational system of church government. There are regional and national bodies of Unitarian churches operating in most countries where there are Unitarian churches. The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU),

spirit and ethos of Humanism. Similar to those who identify as Humanists, Unitarians seek to live together in peace and promote the highest good for all, relying upon the authority of reason, conscience and experience in order to arrive at solutions to problems in a spirit of rational humaneness.

Now, Unitarianism<sup>3</sup> at least as it exists today, is much more than a religion, philosophy or way of life. It is essentially a post-Christian progressive movement, a *position*, and an adventure in continuing spiritual education. It can hardly be called a religious denomination any longer, or even a religion in the sense of its being *one* single, cohesive religion (which clearly it is not, assuming it ever was); hence, the term *metareligion*. Unitarianism is not so much a religion per se as an *approach* to religion, the humanities, the arts, and the sciences, and a *praxis*, that is, a particular and quite distinctive way in which certain spiritual principles (such as the inherent worth and dignity of every person, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the interdependent web of all existence) are engaged, applied and put into practice.

Unitarianism is also a *way of looking at life*---with curiosity, openness, non-discrimination and choiceless awareness. As such it has accepted the basic skeptical stance of Humanism. Like Humanism, Unitarianism has its philosophical roots in such people as the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Sceptics, all of whom affirmed natural morality, freedom from superstition, and salvation by character.

As a metareligion Unitarianism---although *not* a philosophy *per se*---performs very a similar function to philosophy at *its* best in that it [Unitarianism] provides a fundamental and overall coherent ‘apparatus’ for understanding and criticism, illuminating all fields of human inquiry including politics, economics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, ethics, and the arts. Unitarianism is a ‘key’ to understanding those and other disciplines. In that respect, and many others, Unitarianism owes a debt of gratitude to Humanism.

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founded in March 1995, is the peak international representative body for Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist groups. The ICUU is a partnership of member groups in more than 20 countries.

<sup>3</sup> Also known in some places as Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarian praxis refers to those activities and ways of understanding both religion and the world, using and applying the traditional Unitarian principles of reason, freedom, tolerance, as well as love in action---all in a spirit of rational humaneness combined with a sensible amount of healthy skepticism and reverent agnosticism---and then living out those principles in our daily lives ... irrespective of whatever be our own individual spiritual path or particular religion.

As is the case with Humanism with which Unitarianism has been quite closely associated (especially over the past 200 years or so), Unitarianism is not, and has never been, a matter of belief---nor in my view is any true religion for that matter---but a matter of acceptance of, and reliance upon, certain basic, fundamental principles---principles that are inherently and essentially Humanistic, that is, human-focused, in nature. Now, if Unitarianism be a 'position,' it is a position in which its members constantly 'move.' They 'do not stand at all, [but] move' (in the words of L B Fisher).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Unitarianism enables people of all kinds to come together on a regular basis in order to develop and explore, in the company of others, their own distinctive spirituality without the dogma of conventional, institutionalized religion. Infused by Enlightenment ideals and Humanist values, Unitarianism offers a spiritual philosophy and religion *beyond belief*, transcends national, cultural, racial and even religious and faith boundaries, for it affirms and celebrates the oneness, essential unity and sacredness of all life and the innate worth of all beings.

Three fundamental Enlightenment principles underpin the whole of Unitarianism---freedom, reason and tolerance. For those Unitarians who had and continue to have some sort of theistic belief, reason itself is considered to be both a means and a form of divine revelation. Now, while some but certainly not all Unitarians accept a few ideas that could be labelled 'transrational,' anything that offends against human reason is considered suspect and ought not to be accepted on face value, and certainly not upon faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Fisher, a Universalist minister of yesteryear, wrote those words in 1921. Although he was speaking about Universalists, which was then a separate American denomination, the sentiment applies just as much to Unitarians.

Speaking personally, Unitarianism has afforded many people throughout the world a *spiritual home*, devoid of superstition and all notions of supernaturalism and traditional theism, in which they can feel comfortable. Speaking personally, I embrace that great Humanist of yesteryear Sir Julian Huxley's exposition and understanding of divinity, namely, the divine is that which is worthy of adoration, that which compels awe, reverence and a profound sense of wonder. In the words of the first Humanist Manifesto,<sup>5</sup> the vast majority of whose signatories were Unitarian ministers who were also Humanists, 'Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious.'

The roots of Unitarianism<sup>6</sup> go right back to the early years of the Christian Church--- indeed, even further back. Proto-Unitarians were active under such names and groups of persons as the Ebionites, the Samosatensians, the Arians, and the Photinians. However, the name 'Unitarian' was first used in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe to refer to certain Protestant dissenters from the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In that regard, a number of prominent Biblical scholars affirmed the notion that the Divine was One and Indivisible, and challenged the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was *uniquely* and *exclusively* God. We think especially of Francis David, Faustus Socinus, and Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake in 1553 for his so-called 'Unitarian heresy' in John Calvin's Geneva. They, in particular, may be said to be responsible for the birth of 'modern' Unitarianism at least in its original and more Christian guise. In 1568 King John Sigismund, the Unitarian ruler of Transylvania (now Hungary), issued the first great edict for religious freedom in his land. By 1600 there were 425 Unitarian churches in that country alone. Unitarianism came to the United States of America over 185 years ago, and became a religious movement of wide reach and deep implications even if the number of its membership numbers have always been comparatively small.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Humanist Manifesto' is a trademark of the American Humanist Association.

<sup>6</sup> The theological roots of Unitarianism can be found in early Judaism as well as in 16th century Europe (in particular, Hungary, Poland and Romania).

<sup>7</sup> See Karl M Chworowsky, 'What is Unitarianism?', in Leo Rosten (ed), *A Guide to the Religions of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp 142-143.

Now, as respects Great Britain, the first Unitarian churches in England were led by Presbyterians who had been purged from the Church of England in the 'Great Ejection' of 1662. A 'unitarian' (as opposed to 'trinitarian') approach to looking at God as one became quite widespread in the Church of England in the 17th century. However, Unitarianism spread not only in the Church of England but most significantly amongst the dissenters from the Established Church, later known as Nonconformists. From its beginning the UK General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches included Free Methodist and Non-Subscribing Presbyterian groups which had broken away from their Calvinist parent churches. They refused to accept Anglican practice though their churches had up to this point in time been otherwise 'orthodox' in their theology. It was then that Unitarian thinking began to express itself in a church organization in Britain. Some English Presbyterians, whose churches were amongst the oldest in dissent, adopted Unitarianism in the second half of the 18th century, to be followed by the old General Baptists whose Assembly had been formed in 1653. In Britain the General Baptists were universalists<sup>8</sup> and they merged with the Unitarian movement in the 19th century. Now, this whole movement in Britain was not actually called Unitarianism, as that belief was specifically proscribed by the Toleration Act of 1689. Unitarianism did not become legal in Britain until 1813. The term applied to erstwhile Unitarians at this time was 'rational dissenters.' Joseph Priestley,<sup>9</sup> the famous scientist and discoverer of oxygen, was the principal, but certainly not the very first, organizer of modern Unitarianism in Great Britain.

The first recorded Unitarian on Australian soil was not a member of the establishment, but rather a convict. The Rev. Thomas Fysche Palmer was sentenced to writing 'seditious and inflammatory writing,' specifically a tract against the corrupt property franchises in elections to the House of Commons, and was sent to Botany Bay arriving in 1794. The Rev. Palmer died in a Spanish prison, accused of being a British spy, in Guam in 1802 after having completed his sentence and attempting to return to England.

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<sup>8</sup> Universalists in Christianity taught that God's love was universal for all God's children, and that God would not condemn any person to eternal torment in hell. The upshot of this idea---even right up to this day---is that we too must love with a universal love for all persons ... without exception.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to being an eminent chemist Priestly was a theologian, Unitarian minister, educator, political theorist, and natural philosopher. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States of America, attended Priestley's church while living in Philadelphia.

The next Unitarian minister to visit Australia was the Rev. Maxell Davidson in 1851, being the first Minister to arrive in Melbourne. The Sydney congregation was formed in 1850, with the Rev. George H Stanley being appointed its minister in 1853, and the first church being located in Macquarie Street. As respects South Australia, the first public Unitarian service was held at in Adelaide in October 1855, although Unitarian Christians had been meeting privately for some time previously. I will leave it at that as respects Unitarianism in Australia---there is so much more I could say on the topic---except to mention the existence of an organization of Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships appropriately called the Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association.<sup>10</sup>

I want to spend some time now talking about the growth of Unitarianism in the United States of America. Why? Because hopefully it will show the extent of Enlightenment and Humanist ideals and values in the context of the Christian Church. You will find the same phenomenon at work as respects Unitarianism in most if not all other countries but I think we see the phenomenon at work most fully and wonderfully in the United States of America. (Don't get me wrong, I'm no Yankeeophile.)

The American church historian Sydney E Ahlstrom, who was a Yale University professor and a highly regarded specialist in the religious history of the United States, described the Christian Unitarians in the United States of America as an 'American Reformation.' He draws a comparison between the Protestant Reformation of 1517 and the establishment of the Unitarianism in America in the early 17th century. The Unitarian Church was considered heretical by the mainstream Christian denominations because it did not adhere to the orthodox teaching of the Trinity and denied the complete sinfulness of man. This liberal stance was rooted in Enlightenment

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<sup>10</sup> ANZUUA (it became ANZUUA in October 2008) was established in 1974 as ANZUA---the Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Association---to succeed the Australian Assembly of Unitarian and Liberal Christian Churches. All the groups and the Association itself maintain connections with the British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. ANZUUA is a member association of the International Consortium of Unitarian Universalists (ICUU) and the International Association of Religious Freedom (IARF). The home congregation and small group ministry to religious liberals and freethinkers.of which I am the founding minister, the Sydney Unitarian Chalice Circle, is fully independent and autonomous but has an informal and loose spiritual connection with the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in North America (the 'UUA') by virtue of my membership of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, which is a member congregation (one 'without walls') of the UUA.

and Humanist philosophy of reason and logic, and Unitarians adopted and utilized these Enlightenment ideals to develop their own quite distinctive theology. The result was a rational faith---a faith based *on* reason, and *in* reason itself. Unitarians emphasized experiences of the Divine through reason, logic and what they saw as rightly interpreting the Bible. I should also add that 'faith' in a Unitarian context is not blind trust but rather conviction arrived at through mental discipline, the use of logic and reason, good education, human experience, noble example, friendly cooperation with others, and labour of the human spirit and the heart.

Historically, the American Unitarians were a distinct denomination and movement of Christians with devoted roots in Puritan Congregationalism. Numerous people, despite their individual differences, were in rebellion against the then current Calvinism, which had for so long ruled New England religious thought. These people were also to some extent in reaction against the more extreme aspects of the religious skepticism of the 18th and early 19th centuries (the 'American Enlightenment'). One branch of the movement bore fruit as Unitarianism, the Unitarians having split from the Congregationalist Churches of New England on the late 18th century after decades of being its liberal 'left wing.' Their counterparts, the Universalists, abhorred the doctrines of predestination and election (of the 144,000 saved souls).<sup>11</sup>

Then, during the early to mid-19th century, another branch came into existence, bringing into revival Neoplatonism which later evolved into the Transcendental Movement within---and within a fairly short period of time outside of---Unitarianism. Transcendentalism<sup>12</sup> has been described as being a 'counter-reformation' within the

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<sup>11</sup> The American Unitarian Association was established in Boston MA in 1825, and The Universalist Church of America was first organized in Gloucester MA in 1779. The American author Susan Jacoby has written, 'The ministers who led this transformation were American originals, men of great passion and moderation, combining a philosophical commitment to natural rights with a pragmatic reliance on empirical knowledge.' S Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p 49. Unitarianism and Universalism were very similar in theology except that most Universalists, at least initially, still accepted the divinity of Jesus, a doctrine ordinarily rejected by most Unitarians. Said Thomas Starr King (1824-1864), Universalist *and* Unitarian minister: 'The Universalists think God is too good to damn them forever; the Unitarians think they are too good to be damned forever.'

<sup>12</sup> In this context the word 'transcendentalist' refers to the 'transcending,' or going beyond, empiricism, more specifically, by ascertaining *a priori* the fundamental principles of human knowledge. The central idea of Transcendentalism was that there is a 'Presence' and 'Power' within us known as the 'Self' (our 'True/Real Self') that is said to transcend the finite, little, false 'self' with which we all tend to identify.

'reformation' movement of American Unitarianism. It sought a more naturalistic, but at the same time less rationalistic, spirituality. When we think of the Transcendentalists we think of such eminent people as the essayist, lecturer and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (himself a former Unitarian minister), the great Unitarian minister, reformer and abolitionist Theodore Parker, and the writer Henry David Thoreau.<sup>13</sup>

Now, the Unitarian congregation was centralized in the New England district of the United States. Now, as the Unitarian denomination grew in the 19th century it began to spread throughout the entire United States. For the most part Unitarianism---at least in the United States but also in many other countries as well---was the religion of the educated and the refined ... even parochially so.<sup>14</sup> In a letter to her brother, the great American writer and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote that all of the trustees and professors of Harvard College at the time were Unitarian. Prominent American Unitarians included men like the minister and theologian Andrews Norton, the minister and educator Charles Chauncy, President John Adams, his son President John Quincy Adams, Senator Daniel Webster, and Alexander Hamilton (who was a Founding Father of the United States of America).<sup>15</sup> Later on we would more great American Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing, who was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early 19th century and, along with Andrews Norton, one of Unitarianism's leading theologians.

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<sup>13</sup> Transcendentalism (in many ways German idealism [Hegel, *et al*] grafted upon Unitarianism) brought a renewed interest in such things as mysticism, idealism, Eastern religions, metaphysics, the powers of the mind, and the idea of the Immanent God. The self-help mind-cure healing and spiritual movement known as New Thought---a diverse movement of quasi-Christian and non-Christian groups---took form in about 1830 under the name of Transcendentalism. Indeed, the New Thought movement is linked to the Transcendentalists *within* and later *outside* the Unitarian movement.

<sup>14</sup> It was jokingly said that Unitarians used to believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighbourhood of Boston.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States of America was a non-practising Episcopalian (Anglican). He denounced what he saw as the superstitions of Christianity and rejected the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Deity of Christ. He also rejected all notions of supernaturalism, believing instead in materialism, reason and science. In 1822 Jefferson declared Unitarianism to be the future faith of the United States of America, and in the last year of his life he did indeed declare himself to be a Unitarian. The other American presidents who were Unitarians are Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft. President Barack Obama, whose mother and maternal grandparents were Unitarians, had some exposure to Unitarian Universalism in his youth when living in Honolulu, Hawaii, and that has clearly left its mark in his quite liberal approach to religion.

You know, Christian fundamentalists----particularly American ones, who seem to be the most obnoxious and stupid of the lot---keep telling us that the United States of America was founded as a Christian nation. That is a lie. They would also have us believe that the Founding Fathers of the United States of America were all good, evangelical Christians. That is also a lie. The truth is that the United States of America had, as Robert Green Ingersoll pointed out, 'the first secular government that was ever founded in this world', with a distinctly nonsectarian Constitution. Furthermore, the Founding Fathers of the country were far from being fundamentalist evangelical Christians. For the most part, they were Deists,<sup>16</sup> freethinkers, rationalists and secularists.

As a prominent figure in the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson also led the reaction against Unitarianism. Emerson's father, William Emerson, was a minister of the First Church of Boston, which was a Unitarian congregation. Like his father, Ralph Waldo Emerson was an ordained Unitarian minister. On July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his famous 'Divinity School Address' to Harvard Divinity School. In his address Emerson presented the idea of breaking free from the traditions of institutionalized religion, denounced organized religion as a whole, and stated that every man was divine.

Traditionally, Unitarians rejected the supposed deity (but not the divinity) of Jesus---there went the doctrine of the Trinity as well (hence the name 'Unitarian')---and they tended to regard Jesus as the supreme 'Way-shower,' the 'Great Example,' but certainly *not* the Great Exception. The man Jesus, along with other great teachers and way-showers, shows us the way out of selfishness, which lies at the heart of all human problems, and by means of his spirituality and overcoming the bondage and limitations of sin Unitarians saw Jesus as one who could deliver us out of what would otherwise be a perpetual state of bondage to ego-self, self-centredness and self-absorption. This was, and still is, to many religious liberals and perhaps even some Humanists a vision with which they could identify with both intellectual honesty and at great emotional depth.

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<sup>16</sup> A deist believes that an essentially unknowable and otherwise uncontactable god created everything but denies supernatural revelation altogether. Deism was prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries during the Age of Enlightenment.

Of course, as time went by, Unitarianism moved more and more away from Christianity, and by the end of the 19th century Unitarianism in America was more Humanistic than Christian, and early in the 20th century Unitarian ministers in various parts of the United States of America began calling themselves Humanists.<sup>17</sup> In 1933 a group of 34 liberal Humanists in the USA---mainly Unitarian ministers<sup>18</sup> and also philosopher John Dewey---attempted to enunciate the Humanist principles that seemed to them fundamental. That was the occasion of the promulgation of the first Humanist Manifesto to which I have already referred. In time, many Unitarians would embrace other belief-systems such as Buddhism and earth-based spirituality. Unitarianism has expanded beyond its Christian roots with many modern day Unitarians embracing Humanism, agnosticism, various progressive and non-traditional forms of theism, and even hard atheism. Unitarians have always been decidedly individualistic in their religion and spirituality.

As I mentioned right at the outset, I am still a Humanist in my values and thinking---and in my heart. Yes, heart. Humanism that is pure rationalism, but lacking in humaneness, is not Humanism at all. Consistent with the 'minimum statement' of Humanism adopted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union<sup>19</sup> I reject all notions of traditional theism as well as all notions of so-called supernaturalism, believing that there is only one order or level of reality, that of ordinary things in time and space. To talk of there being any possibility of 'higher' and 'lower' orders or levels of reality is both empirically ridiculous and logically unspeakable. This understanding and philosophy of life I gained from the writings and teachings of the late John Anderson, who was Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney from 1927 until 1958, and I will always be grateful for the insight that I have gained. My albeit limited understanding of science has

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<sup>17</sup> After the Humanist influx it was said jokingly (but not falsely) that Unitarians 'believe[d] in One God---at most.' Then there's this Unitarian 'prayer': 'Dear God, if there is a God, if you can, save my soul, if I have a soul.'

<sup>18</sup> In the United States of America the largest number of self-identified Humanists are members of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Smaller numbers are associated with other bodies such as the American Humanist Association, the American Ethical Union, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

<sup>19</sup> At its meeting (held in Mexico City, in November 1996) the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union ('IHEU') approved the followed 'minimum statement' of Humanism: 'Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.'

given me the assurance that this universe of ours came into existence either uncaused or self-caused. Hence, I also reject any notion of a supposed supra-personal creator---of any 'creator' for that matter---of the universe.

Now, I was reared a Baptist. Years later I became a Unitarian drawing from a number of spiritual paths and traditions. Yet both of the Churches I have just mentioned have certain important matters in common, despite a great number of doctrinal differences between them. You see, both of the Churches I mentioned believe in a strong separation of church and state---sadly some Southern Baptists in the United States in recent years appear to have forgotten this all-important Baptist tenet---and both are non-creedal churches. Religious creeds and other articles, confessions and professions of faith are very dangerous things. For one thing, they never overcome the inherent limitations of time and space whereas that which is of ultimate significance---some call it the divine---is both beyond time and space and yet ever active in time and space. I am proud to belong to and pastor a church which welcomes, as members and congregants, all who come in good faith with a sincere desire to develop and explore their own spirituality without the dogma and doctrine of mainstream, traditional Christianity. We do not turn away any person who comes to our church with good intentions. We erect no barriers around our altars. In fact we have no altar, as such, in our churches. Rather than speaking for them---which would for us be impossible in any event---we let every Unitarian speak for him or herself about their own individual faith or life-stance.<sup>20</sup>

Most Unitarians of whatever persuasion would accept that there is much wisdom in the Bible---as well as a lot of stuff that is offensive to reason and what we deem acceptable today---but all would reject the doctrine of 'divine revelation,' as well as all notions of biblical infallibility and inerrancy. You see, the prerogative of critical appreciation of all writings---sacred or otherwise---is intimately, indeed inextricably, related to liberty of conscience, which is another Enlightenment and Humanist ideal. Fundamentalism,

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<sup>20</sup> Section 20(d) of the *Unitarian Church Act 1927 (NSW)*, a statute which regulates the affairs of the Sydney Unitarian Church of which I was for a period the senior minister, typically provides as follows: 'The congregation shall not at any time make any rule whereby the acceptance of any creed, article or profession of faith shall be established as a condition of membership of the congregation, and any such rule if made shall have no force or effect ... No particular doctrines or opinion are or shall be required to be taught or observed or forbidden to be taught or observed in such congregation ...'

whether Christian, Islamic or otherwise, is a menace, indeed an evil. It is the totally unwarranted and unjustified imposition upon so-called sacred scripture---whether Christian, Islamic or Jewish---of an artificial and irrational construct---an ideology---that results in claims being made for and about scripture that are not expressed or even implied in the scriptures themselves.

Take, for example, the Christian Scriptures. They nowhere claim or assume infallibility or inerrancy. The texts usually relied on by Christian fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals to support such a position<sup>21</sup> at most support a view that the books of the Hebrew Bible, and maybe some of Paul's epistles,<sup>22</sup> were inspired by God, and maybe the prophets and apostles were inspired, but none assert that their inspiration made them or their writings infallible, and to make such an assertion is unwarranted. The fact is the Bible contains numerous errors and contradictions that are fatal to the theory of its inerrancy, and no amount of purported harmonisation of Scripture can overcome that. Not only is the whole idea of the supposed infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture contrary to reason and common sense, it is downright unbiblical as well.<sup>23</sup> If Unitarians use the phrase 'the Word of God'---and many wouldn't---they use it to mean 'every revelation of truth, every unfolding of beauty, every voice of wisdom that human experience discovers in its slow progress toward clearer understanding, freedom, and the Good Life.'<sup>24</sup>

Unitarianism, infused by Enlightenment and Humanist ideals and values, takes issue with any religion that claims to be 'final.' I well remember my Baptist pastor of yesteryear saying, in a sermon, 'God has spoken his final word in Jesus Christ.' Really? Muslims assert that God has spoken his final word in Muhammad, that Muhammad was

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<sup>21</sup> 2 Tim 3:16 ('All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness'), and 2 Peter 1:21 ('For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost').

<sup>22</sup> Paul himself was equivocal about the matter in at least one of his epistles (see 1 Cor 7:10, 12, 40).

<sup>23</sup> Paul himself distinctly declared the partial, provisional and temporary nature of that which he taught, for after declaring that that he was inspired and led by the Spirit to know and to speak Christian truth (see 1 Cor 2:10-16), he went on to say, in the very same epistle, that all knowledge, insofar as we are able to state it, is partial, relative and incomplete and will be done away with, and that we only know and prophesy in part (see 1 Cor 13:8-12).

<sup>24</sup> Karl M Chworowsky, 'What is Unitarianism?', in Leo Rosten (ed), *A Guide to the Religions of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p 143.

the last person in history with whom God communicated directly. By the way, that same Baptist pastor said, 'If Christianity is right, all other religions are wrong.' Note the use of a 'conditional statement', which is not an argument at all as it doesn't specify the premises that are needed to support the purported conclusion.

Now, once you free yourself from the notion that just because some supposed holy book or person says something, it or they must be true, and true for all time, a whole new world opens for you. Here is some good advice from the Buddha that I have lived by. It has served me well throughout the years, and it makes perfectly good sense:

Believe nothing because a so-called wise man said it.  
Believe nothing because a belief is generally held.  
Believe nothing because it is written in ancient books.  
Believe nothing because it is said to be of divine origin.  
Believe nothing because someone else believes it.  
Believe only what you yourself judge to be true.

The American Baptist preacher Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick once said:<sup>25</sup>

Better believe in no God than to believe in a cruel God, a tribal God, a sectarian God. Belief in God is one of the most dangerous beliefs a man can cherish. ...

In August 2002, at the Sydney Town Hall, before the start of an important debate<sup>26</sup> between Dr William Lane Craig and Dr Peter Slezak on the topic of the existence of God I read out to all assembled those immortal words of Fosdick, having been asked by the debate organisers, St Barnabas Anglican Church, Broadway, to say a few words. The Humanist Society of New South Wales, on whose behalf I was speaking, had been involved in the selection of the atheist---Dr Slezak---to debate Craig. Now, do you know that the videotape of the debate produced by the Church did not contain the words of Fosdick. They were edited out by the then assistant minister of the church. The idea that a Christian minister---albeit a long-dead Modernist of yesteryear---could rightly speak about the dangers associated with belief in God was all too much for the Sydney Anglicans to cope with. The poor darlings! I was, and remain, disgusted at the Church's

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in George N Marshall, *Challenge of a Liberal Faith* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1970), p 113.

<sup>26</sup> *The Great Debate--Atheism vs Christianity: Where Does the Evidence Point?* Sydney Town Hall, Sydney NSW, 27 August 2002. Organized by St Barnabas Anglican Church, Broadway, Sydney NSW.

ensorship. Later I was to debate at various universities a number of Sydney Anglican bishops and other clergy. I was soon to learn that debating---and even interacting with---so-called (and self-servingly called) 'Bible-believing Christians' can be a very unpleasant---and totally *unChrist-like*---experience ... but that's another story.

Back to the subject of belief. I now say this---*why* believe at all? Belief is *not* a criterion of truth. What is *real* does not become any more real because we believe that it is real, nor does the proposition 'X is true [or real]' become any truer because we believe that it is true. The current president of the Unitarian Universalist Association,<sup>27</sup> the Rev. Peter Morales the Association's first Latino president, has stated:<sup>28</sup>

I am now convinced that 'belief,' in the way we usually use the word, is actually the enemy of faith, religion, and spirituality. Let me say that again: *belief is the enemy of faith*. When we dwell on beliefs we ask all the wrong questions. My faith is much more about what I love than about what I think. [*Emphasis in the original*]

Morales goes on to say that any religion that is focused on *belief* is 'a dangerous corruption of true religion.' True religion, according to Morales, is 'about what we love, not about what we think.' It's 'about what you and I hold sacred.' The Unitarian Universalist movement, says Morales, offers religion *beyond* belief, 'religion that transcends culture, race and class ... religion where we can grow spiritually, a religion where we can forge deep and lasting relationships, a religion where we can join hands to help heal a broken world.' *That* is the kind of religion---or metareligion---that I embrace.

But what exactly *is* the problem with 'beliefs,' you may ask? Well, the Buddha referred to beliefs as being in the nature of thought coverings or veils (*āvarnas*). These thought coverings or veils do not reveal reality, indeed they distort reality. How? Well, they prevent us from *knowing* and *experiencing* things as they really are in all their *directness* and *immediacy*. Belief is conditioning. Knowledge is experiential.

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<sup>27</sup> The full title of the organization is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in North America ('UUA'). In 1961 the American Unitarian Association and The Universalist Church of America merged to form the UUA.

<sup>28</sup> See 'Belief is the enemy of faith' <<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/289346.shtml>> (accessed 4 April 2014). The article appeared in the Fall 2013 [15 August 2013] issue of *UU World* (on p 5).

I have always found helpful these words attributed to the Buddha: 'Do not believe, for if you believe, you will never know. If you really want to know, don't believe.' There is also this sound advice from the Pāli texts of Buddhism:

In what is seen, there should be only the seen;  
in what is heard, only the heard;  
in what is sensed, only the sensed;  
in what is thought, only the thought.

Yes, we need to safely 'navigate' our way through life, but beliefs actually stand in the way and hold us back. What we *really* need is *knowledge* and *understanding*. There is so much that we can *know*. We can *know* that we are alive ... in the sense of being part of the flow or procession of life. We can *know* that we are persons among persons. We can *know* that sensations arise in us, and as respects each such sensation we can *know* the fact of its existence as well as the fact of its strength or weakness. More importantly, we can *know* each sensation---as a *bare* fact---as and when it arises ... and as it truly is ... in all its *directness* and *immediacy*. Bugger beliefs!

I leave you with this thought. The only thing we have to fear, in the words of the great American Unitarian William Ellery Channing, is 'the death of goodness in [our] own breast.'

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