

Unitarian Reconstruction: Argument for a Colloquium

There can be little doubt about the pronounced nature of the intellectual crisis facing the Unitarian movement and the need for serious reconstruction. The erosion of the Christian identity of British Unitarianism by pagans, naturalists, humanists and others is simply a symptom of the decline of a morally and philosophically compelling theology. To seek to persuade and convince is not the imposition of a creed, and internal opponents cannot be blamed if Unitarian Christian theology fails to gain assent. The rejection of Unitarianism by other Christian denominations derives from the spread of non-Christianity among Unitarians. It also reflects the sense among orthodox Christians that they do not need to engage with Unitarian ideas: that this is a closed chapter and all the debates have been had. Intellectual reconstruction is therefore by no means a sufficient condition of resuscitation, but it is surely a necessary one. To this end, certain Cambridge Unitarians and sympathisers propose the organisation of a Unitarian theological conference. It should be confined to theists and Christians who are interested in seeing whether the Unitarian tradition can be revived. Depending on the quality of the papers, a publication might ensue.

What could this sort of discussion hope to achieve? Suggestions can be signalled to provoke debate. Unitarians have hitherto tended to regard their speech as the antithesis of prejudice, in the strict sense of rejecting the pre-judgement of theological issues. The classical Unitarian refutes St Anselm, who declared in his *Proslogion* that ‘I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand’. As Joseph Priestley put it:

But should free inquiry lead to the destruction of Christianity itself, it ought not, on that account, to be discontinued; for we can only wish for the prevalence of Christianity on the supposition of its being true; and if it fall before the influence of free inquiry, it can only do so in consequence of its not being true.¹

The Priestleyan view sees Christianity as a kind of possible object, or system of claims about the world whose truth can be determined by a preceding phase of uncommitted debate. In practice there are two consequences: either the process of debate, or inquiry itself, imperialises the faith – the faith becomes actually equivalent

¹ Joseph Priestley, ‘The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon’, in P. Miller (ed.), *Joseph Priestley: Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), xxiv

to ‘free inquiry’, or else belief becomes as *post hoc* and definitive as the deduction of a problem. The impossibility of the latter (the implausibility of a common deduction of religion) underpins the creedless character of most Unitarianism. There have indeed been historical forms of rational credalism, such as the Racovian catechism, which have presented themselves as authoritative propositions conformable to reason. However, modern (let alone postmodern) scepticism renders this kind of assertion even less compelling than traditional dogmatism. What has actually happened is that common commitment has collapsed in the face of an ever-expanding critique, leaving Unitarian Christianity vulnerable to a motley host of ill-digested naturalistic doctrines. This is the intellectual structure of the crisis presently facing Unitarian theology.

Does this mean that there is no alternative to a return to Anselmian method? That a minimal, but definite set of Unitarian dogmas should be asserted as the groundwork of renewed religion? After all, traditional religion has persisted by insisting that reason is the handmaiden of faith, and that its proper role is to suggest the coherent implications of faith received. Perhaps a dogmatic Arianism or Socinianism could be founded *de novo*, but only at the cost of grievous damage to the way in which historical Unitarianism has actually developed: to the morals and values of biblical freedom that have constituted the Unitarian tradition. These are the distinctive and attractive gifts that Unitarianism can bring to our common culture. The truth of Unitarianism does not lie in a closed system of propositions – although renewed attention to the rich expansion of systematic commentary is vital. Instead, the contribution of Unitarianism as a historically extended way of thinking and acting manifests its truth. If we say, as we must, that human religious language is non-exhaustive and allusive, then the distinctive perspective offered by Unitarian Christianity takes its place in a plural world of religious reflection. It is sufficient for salvation but not exclusive. Thus there is no deduction that can show Trinitarian orthodoxy to be ‘wrong’ – God may be one and three at the same time, and also one, because we do not really understand what ‘one’ and ‘three’ mean in relation to the divine. There is no deduction that can disprove secular humanism (the placing of ultimate value in a matrix of evolved individuals) because there is no categorical understanding of the human person. What there can be is elaboration and reconstruction of the Unitarian canon, the commentary and reflective literary tradition concerning the divine unity, in order to propound a distinctive Unitarian *paedia*. In this sense, the challenge thrown down by the Koran is the correct one: ‘If you doubt

what We have revealed to Our servant, produce one chapter comparable to it' (2:23). The debate between religions is a comparison of literatures in the most expansive sense. It is analogous to the contrast of artistic traditions – not of course identical, as its primary criterion is the perception of holiness rather than aesthetic value. Hence the argument with Christian orthodoxy is about which tradition of commentary expounds most meaningfully the revelation of Jesus Christ. The argument with secular humanism is about which commentary reflects best upon the moral and spiritual nature of man. Let them produce one parable.

Canon and *paedia* should be fundamental subjects of Unitarian reconstruction (others of course may be found). The former is not just a reading list, and the latter not simply a list of instructions. Canonicity requires recognition of genre and form as much as specific texts: canonical works are generative of works yet to come. Unitarian teaching and cultural formation should propose a distinctive conception of the liberal good life. What is it to be a free person, and to exercise virtue in light of the divine unity? What is liberal teaching? One would expect ideas like mutual education to figure largely, but the practical arrangement of this and more didactic conceptions depend upon a teaching ministry. A colloquium should get to grips with what addressing such questions would really entail. Neither the sterile iteration of dogmatic statements, nor the fiction of a formless religion will suffice for Unitarian reconstruction. The re-articulation of a living community, and its tradition, might.

[Joe Bord 10/11/05]