

SERMON "THE POINT OF VIEW"

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Eleanor Wilson was a member of the Sydney Unitarian Church for many years, serving in a variety of capacities. The church hall is named for her. In a sermon in 1979 she related an incident which had happened outside her flat at the end of the previous year.

Two cars had collided, and a young girl was injured. Eleanor had not actually seen it happen, but hearing a commotion had made her look out of her window a moment after the collision.

Seeing a small girl lying on the road, she went out with a pillow and a rug, and did what she could to help. The police were soon on the scene, questioning the bystanders. After a while the sergeant asked for her version, but Eleanor told him that she did not actually see what happened.

"Well," said the sergeant, "that will be one less account to be unravelled and compared." He went on to say that it was quite amazing how a number of people who had seen the same incident could all tell different stories. She had responded by quoting the old Latin saying that there are as many opinions as there are people'.

And, of course, there **are** as many opinions or points of view as there are people - because no two people think **exactly** alike or see things from **exactly** the same angle. Our views on anything in the world will depend on the constitution of our minds. What we think and what we believe will depend on the point of view which our nature and our circumstances and our experience afford us.

Our ability to **change** our ideas and our opinions will also depend on our nature, on the constitution of our minds, and on the circumstances and experiences of our lives, such as our contact with other people and other ideas. It all depends on our point of view.

Mr and Mrs "A" live in a luxury home in the "best" suburb of the city. They have a vast fortune, inherited from their parents. Their every want is attended to by their household staff. They have an abundance of leisure, and can travel wherever and whenever they wish (except in these coronavirus times!). The accidents of their birth and their wealth assure them of the best of everything - at least materially. Is it any wonder that they should regard this as the best of all possible worlds?

If they support the social, commercial, political and ecclesiastical systems which conspire to make their position seem permanent, is it any wonder that they might regard with great aversion and fear any proposals of a kind which might threaten their comfortable position? If they have any religious views, would they not be likely to conceive of a God of permanence; a God also averse to change; a divine government of the universe which gives its sanction to things as they are?

Mr and Mrs "B" live in a wretched flat in the "worst" suburb of the city. Circumstances seem always to have been against them. Although they are industrious and honest, their work has been intermittent and poorly paid; poverty is their constant lot. Is it any wonder that they should regard this as the worst of all

Is it any wonder that they might regard the social, commercial, political and ecclesiastical systems under which they exist, and which allow or create or perpetuate their circumstances, as the worst which human stupidity or callousness could devise?

If they have any religious view, would they not be likely to conceive of God as a monster to endorse or allow such a system - or to conceive of a God which favours revolution and the overthrow of such a system?

Two couples, with some things in common:- same city, same language, same ethnic background and so on. But there are enough differences in their circumstances to affect their philosophies of life and their religious views.

Social circumstances can profoundly affect and shape our human responses; unjust economic conditions can create the climate of revolution.

But philosophy and religion do not depend only upon material circumstances, although they play an important part. Philosophy and religion depend still more on the constitution of our minds.

There are millions of people who entertain what may seem to us irrational religious notions, or who practise what may seem to us weird ceremonies in connection with their religion.

How many of us, for example, would hold a belief in the literal truth of all the miracles related in the Bible? How many of us would believe in a Deity which

How many of us believe that ordinary bread and wine can be literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus by a priest saying the right words over them?

To the illiterate Mediterranean peasant, taught to believe in miracles, in saints, in holy pictures and wooden statues, the universe is quite different from the universe of a Plato or an Emerson. It all depends on the point of view. It all depends on **our** point of view what the universe is to **us**.

Think of an eclipse as witnessed by a trained astronomer and by an uninstructed primitive. They both see the same event, but the impressions made on them are very different.

One sees it as a terrifying miracle and is prostrated in fear, regarding what is happening as a manifestation of the anger of a vengeful Deity. The other sees it as the verification of a scientific forecast, and calmly takes photographs and records observations which will be the basis of future calculations.

Both have witnessed the same event; both would report their genuine experiences of the same fact; but how different would be their experiences and their reports!

Although traditionally the Oriental and Occidental approaches to matters of culture, education, philosophy and religion have been very different, they have increasingly learned from each other in recent decades.

More and more people in the West, for example, have found great value and insight in Eastern spiritual

There is nothing wrong in our having different points of view. That is part of the condition of our being human. We have a duty to see as much as we can from our own point of view and to record as accurately and honestly as possible what we have managed to see. There is nothing wrong - we are not to be blamed - for seeing as we do and for declaring what we see.

There is something wrong - we **are** to be blamed - if we do not use our powers of observation and reasoning; if we do not record and express, honestly and fearlessly, the conclusions we have reached.

But, remember: As part of the condition of **their** being human, other people have the same duty to see as much as they can from their own points of view, and to record as accurately and honestly as possible what they have managed to see.

There is nothing wrong - they are not to be blamed - for seeing as they do and for declaring what they see.

And, we have a duty to try to see their point of view, and to listen to their reasoning. If they also try to see our point of view, and listen to our reasoning, both sides will benefit from the encounter.

The peer and the peasant, the old and the young, the male and the female, the easterner and the westerner, the lay and the professional ... all should try to understand each other's point of view. Not to evangelise or convert, but to understand, and to accept that other people **do** hold different points of view.

Some people claim that Unitarianism is not a religion at all - that it makes no positive statements because it has no creeds which instruct people what to believe.

Certainly we Unitarians have no creed - not because we have no beliefs, but because we recognise that there is not - and never can be -- a Truth once and for all delivered to the saints (or anybody else). We do not have something wrapped up in a dogma or embodied in a form of ritual observance. We do not repeat, parrot-fashion, the creeds from the 1st and 4th centuries - creeds which are still accepted and repeated in orthodox churches, but which seem, at least if interpreted literally, to mean less and less to the 21st century religious climate.

Instead, we say that our denomination - our movement - rests basically on the primacy and essential validity of individual beliefs. As individuals we organise ourselves into a church because we believe that the church is an organisation through which we can work to make our lives more meaningful than they could otherwise be.

As Unitarians, we should not be afraid to change our opinions in the face of new knowledge and experience. The more we know, the more keenly and clearly we should realise what a lot we don't know.

This is one respect in which we differ from orthodoxy, from mainstream Christianity, which all too often has repressed or stood in the way of new knowledge, in the interests of protecting its dogmas. Think for example, of the way orthodox believers maintained the error of a flat earth and martyred those who thought otherwise. So much depends on the point of view, doesn't it?

In her sermon over forty years ago, Eleanor Wilson retold a story which she had found in an American Unitarian magazine.

A man who was interested in old books ran into a friend who was not a bookish sort of person. In the course of their conversation, the friend mentioned that he had just thrown out an old Bible that had been in the attic for generations. Somebody named tauten-something-orother had printed it.

The book lover gasped. "Not Gutenberg? You idiot! You have thrown out one of the first books ever printed! Don't you know that Gutenberg printed the Bible in 1456? Only recently a copy was sold for 400,000 dollars!"

The other man was not impressed. He shook his head and said: "My copy wouldn't be worth ten cents. Some fellow named Martin Luther had scribbled all over it."

I want to finish with a sonnet by Alice M Harrison, called "Conviction":

I cannot tell you who God is, or where he is, or why; I only know man at his best could never make a sky!

I can't explain why faith in God each day gives life
new zest;

I only know, when faith is weak, I'm never at my best. I

cannot tell why hope prevails to energise life's quest;

I only know that when hope fades, my soul is not at
rest.

I cannot tell you what love is, or how it comes, or why;

I only know where true love lives, all selfishness will die.

I can't explain just what sin is, or why it had to be; But
if I do less than my best, some beauty dies in me.

I cannot tell just what prayer is, nor why it yields
such power;

Quiet communion will bring poise, and strength renewed
each hour.

I can't explain the peace of God, so silently 't is
given;

I only know that when it comes, then life has found its
heaven.

Amen.