

SERMON "ADMITTING UNCERTAINTY"

One Friday afternoon in Sydney, about forty years ago, I was returning home after a long and busy day. At the main entrance to the church premises in Francis Street -- we lived upstairs in the manse flat above the church - there were five young men who were reading the posters and notices.

We got into a long and rather lop-sided discussion, which was more of an interrogation and cross-examination: five against one, with each of them eager to convert me, and to give me an on-the-spot experience of God.

They had the usual off-putting zeal of the evangelistic missionary who is interested only in converting the pagans to true religion - which just happens to be the missionary's religion and also the only true religion - and who has no interest in finding out what the pagans believe or how their beliefs fit into and reflect local geography, history, culture and customs.

I spent my time fielding questions, in isolation, such as "What about where the Bible says . . .?" and of course "Do you believe in God?"

I sometimes wonder just what people mean by a question like "Do you believe in God? - or in . . .?"

I suppose I could say I believe in a lot of things:

- * the sanctity of marriage
- * the concept of justice
- * the value of education
- * the importance of food, water, shelter, clothing
- * the parliamentary system (but who believes politicians??)
- * the capitalist society (whatever that means)
- * apple pie
- * well polished shoes
- * dry cleaning for my suits.

But I don't like questions that come in the "Do you believe in . . .?" form. I usually try to turn it back and ask what they mean by "believe in" and what they mean by the object itself.

We need to define our terms, and I dislike being expected to answer YES or NO when I don't understand just what is meant by the question.

That Friday afternoon, it was interrogation and fielding, rather than any engagement or exchange of ideas, experiences, and cohesive explanations.

Their questions and "explanatory notes" sounded very similar. It was a bit like listening to Donald Duck's three nephews, Hewey, Lewey and Dewey. It didn't much matter which of them actually spoke, except to keep me guessing about where the next question would come from and to what new tangent it might lead.

They quoted freely from the Bible. The quotations rolled trippingly off the tongue. They had obviously had lots of practice, but over a limited range. They did not seem to know that the Bible actually has contradictions and inconsistencies.

They regarded the Bible as The Direct Word of God, and not as something written by human beings for fairly ordinary human reasons like preserving - and giving authority to - their versions of oral traditions. And they said that any apparent contradictions and inconsistencies are only the result of people's - ie my - inability to understand fully the Word of God.

What they knew they knew very well, but it seemed to be in parrot fashion; and I wondered how much of the Bible they had read, and how critically they had done so.

Although I hope I remained civil to the five eager young missionaries, I firmly declined to be instantly converted. I even declined the opportunity to be "given an experience of God".

They and I were simply on quite different wave lengths.

In our Unitarian tradition, theology is important; but our Unitarian theology is natural theology. It is "the study of God by the light of human reason". It is a continuing study which brings about changes of theological understanding in every generation.

This continuing study does not consist in the passing on, without change, of a fixed body of dogma and catechism. It is primarily the work of individual Unitarians, a little helped from time to time by seminars, commissions, discussions, sermons, articles, lectures, or the contrived consensus of a particular congregation.

Albert Einstein wrote:

The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the dower of all true science. . . . To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists . . . this knowledge, this feeling is at the centre of true religiousness.

Faced with the great mysteries of human existence we ought to be modest and humble in our attitude, rather than making dogmatic assertions. Human experience is full of great unanswerable questions. It is better to admit uncertainty than to give dogmatic answers.

Any congregation is a fellowship of human beings gathered together so that they may mutually support and strengthen each other in their search for the meanings of human existence. Religion - especially liberal religion - is such a rich and many-sided reality that not one of us by himself or herself alone can claim to grasp it fully. That's why we need one another in the fellowship of a congregation.

We need the ones who have a deep passion for justice.

We need the ones who are full of kindness and helpfulness.

We need the ones who involve themselves in the search for knowledge.

We need those mystical ones who sense a unity with other human beings through their deep personal relationship with their God.

All of us operate within boundaries; we build fences behind which to shelter:

- * our family and circle of friends
- * our work environment
- * our clubs and associations, based on common interests.

In building those fences, and setting up those boundaries, we tend to gravitate towards people with whom we share something: towards people who shelter behind the same fences and boundaries.

But this can lead us, fairly naturally, to the US and THEM divisions, with all the problems that are involved of separation, prejudice, antagonism and mutual rejection.

The trouble is that, when we stay behind our fences, the boundaries we have set up around our little, familiar bit of territory; when we avoid going out, beyond our own surrounding limitations, into our neighbour's field and territory: what we do is

We need to accept ourselves; we need also to accept other people.

In a piece called "Group Analysis", Robert F Kaufmann wrote:

I don't like Negroes.

I don't like Catholics, and I don't like Jews.

Come to think of it, I'm not particularly wild about Moslems, or Buddhists or the like; or even Protestants.

And while I'm on the subject, I might just as well confess that I don't like Unitarians either.

Frankly, I don't like any group, or any man just because he belongs to that group.

Why, if I liked a man because he was a Negro, then it would be just as logical for another man to hate him for the same reason - and there's no sense to that.

As for me, I'll like - or dislike -- a Negro, or a Jew, or a Catholic, or a Protestant, or an Asian, or anyone, because of the way he thinks and acts, and lives - as an individual.

I think that a person is entitled to that kind of treatment . . . to that kind of respect.

So don't parade your flags, nor flash your old school tie, nor give me that old secret club grip.

When I asked my five young men how I was supposed to distinguish among all those members of any group - Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Rationalists, Atheists, Unitarians, - any group who claim to know the only truth, to have the only real knowledge, to be on the only way - about the only answer I got was along the lines of:

Ah yes, but there is only one way, and that is the way of the Lord as set out in the Bible. Jesus said: "I am the Way . . ."

And I felt as though we had got back to the beginning of the record on an automatic gramophone with only one record.

In 1996 the Baha'is of Sheffield and Dronfield organised and hosted an event at Gosforth Lodge, Dronfield, south of Sheffield, to mark World Religion Day:- with a talk and discussion on "Co-operation Not Competition". It was an interfaith event, based on the contemporary need for spirituality.

The need for spirituality: not the establishment of a particular faith, a particular brand of spirituality. Not even the establishment of the Baha'i faith as the World Religion. It was an occasion for the celebration of the religions of the world, not of a world religion.

I don't know what my five zealous young Sydney missionaries would have thought of such a celebration; what they would have thought of seeking that kind of open, free, mutually respectful unity of spirit, which is not the same as uniformity of dogma.

I doubt whether they - and people like them - would take part in such an event. I suspect that they - and people like them - would not be particularly comfortable even with ecumenical Christian gatherings, based on open, free, mutually respectful acceptance of differences and diversity.

Some people see any kind of diversity as a threat. Unitarians and Free Christians are usually - though not necessarily -- likely to see diversity as a challenge, as a stimulus, as something to be celebrated because it reflects the reality that we human beings are a diverse lot, with different backgrounds and experiences, different needs and goals and fears and hopes.

Rather than try to find a unity in some kind of single, monolithic, imposed dogma, we look for a different basis for our sense of unity. Our basis, our sense of unity, comes from our emphasis on the human aspects of our fellowship - on our relationships with each other as fellow worshippers in a free religious community.

Recognising the richness of diversity, we can celebrate, not any particular doctrine, but the human aspects of fellowship on the basis of mutual respect, tolerance and love.

I finish with a prayer adapted from a prayer entitled "Divine Kinship" by American Unitarian Minister Richard M Fewkes:

In the unity of the Spirit and the bond of Peace, let us seek the soul's yearnings for fullness of life and wholeness of being. We are made One in the common quest for the mystery of Life's ultimate meaning and purpose.

Let us be aware of our kinship with the Divine. Let us be aware of the way in which our fragile human spirit may be an image, a reflection, a manifestation of the Infinite Spirit which dwells in everything and in each one of us and our neighbours.

O God, the Depth of Life within us, make us one with you in mind and heart and body, and make us one with each other. Restore us to our rightful selves. Heal the brokenness of our fragmented lives.

Enable us, O God, to channel the forces of destruction and evil into avenues of creative goodness, into the uplifting of life and the enhancing of beauty.

Let the oneness of your infinite life within all be made manifest in us and in the life of the world. And may love become the light and the law of our being, even the love of God which Jesus made known and manifest so long ago.

Amen.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "George R. Hughes". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.