



New light and truth

Cambridge Unitarian Church, 10 April 2005

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This week I attended the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches in Chester and from it I brought to you in our readings an interesting and valuable story from Indonesia (The Indonesian Global Church of God) which reveals how the Bible remains at the heart of our liberal Christian tradition.

What is striking about this new church is how its serious engagement with the Biblical text has led, not to a narrow sectarian view, but one which has revealed to them that we live in a world sustained by a loving God who calls all faithful people to deeds of justice, mercy, openness and tolerance. Their journey of faith clearly echoes the older Unitarian congregations in Transylvania, Hungary, Poland, Britain and the USA. Unfortunately, especially in the last century, there has been a tendency amongst many British and American churches to abandon the liberal Christian tradition in which the Bible was central. This move has caused many of them to lose direction and spiritual depth. Recently, however, there has been a growing recognition within our churches that authentic liberal spirituality cannot simply be a smorgasbord of ill-digested beliefs and practices. A faith that really means something in a person's life, one which nourishes, sustains and inspires, which is a source of rich insight, strength and guidance, needs to be born out of a deeply rooted and continuous tradition. The churches that have maintained their connection with the Biblical tradition are great examples to us and, in places such as Hungary, Transylvania and Poland, Unitarian communities, the Biblical text helped sustain them in faith through all the vicissitudes of Communism and it is now helping them shape their new future. It was the Unitarian and liberal Christian theologian James Luther Adams who reminded us that "nothing significant has ever been achieved in human history except through long-standing continuities." We forget this at our peril.

An important reason why this tradition is being reexplored in North America is, in part, due to the rise of the religious right. John Buehrens, the former UUA President in describing his new book "Understanding the Bible - An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals" wrote:

Today many otherwise well-informed, intelligent people often speak as though the Bible only says what fundamentalists say that it says and means. This is a real problem, for when we leave interpretations of our religious heritage, or the meaning of our nation, or authentic "family values" - and all of these ideas are intertwined - to religious conservatives, progressives cede power to their opponents and deprive themselves of a rich source of spiritual sustenance (jacket).

Buehrens continues:

The Bible, I submit, is full of peculiar treasures for us because it is our culture's most basic religious and spiritual classic. And the very definition of a classic is a work that is not exhausted by a single reading or interpretation, much less the simple crude understandings we may have had of it as children. Nor even by those we came to in the process of our first critical thinking, since those are often tinged with caricature, anger, or ridicule. No, it bears and merits repeated reinterpretations and fresh understandings (p. 9).

We are experiencing, a little more slowly, the same increase in activity from conservative right-wing Christians. Do we here in the UK really want to make the same mistake that was made in the USA of disconnecting progressive, liberal politics from progressive, liberal religion? The American UUA minister Dr. Nancy Crumbin, visiting our GA meetings this year to deliver the Essex Hall Lecture, warned us of the dangers of this and the last US election revealed this all too clearly.

We are ourselves a church standing in the liberal, progressive Christian tradition and I think we must play our part in ensuring there is no break between our historical and present expression faith nor between them and our politics. This is particularly pressing because here in the UK an election has just been announced and religious matters are on the table in a way that has not been seen in many, many years. Abortion, gay rights, freedom of speech, asylum seekers, global terrorism, global debt, the environment are all subjects

which are being discussed and brought to the political table by religious groups.

One example of this reconnection between faith and politics is that the local Cambridge Churches are hosting the only hustings in the city at which all the candidates will be present. I have the honour of chairing this. I already know that, based on certain narrow interpretations of scripture, particular questions. The answers to these questions that some churches will be seeking we will disagree with very strongly indeed. But I am aware, primarily because I do it all the time in the ecumenical scene that we can counter these arguments very effectively based upon an open-hearted reading of the same Biblical text. But such an open-hearted reading cannot be made if first we don't know and respect the text and approach it ourselves with "compassionate imagination." It has to remain part of our daily, weekly and monthly religious reflection the text which makes our very hearts tick.

James Luther Adams recalls how he spent an evening with the psychologist Erich Fromm, the author of the "Art of Loving." "Eric," said Adams, "you say you are a 'humanist.' But tell me, what really makes you tick?" After a long silence, Fromm replied, "You are right. It's the spirit of the Hebrew prophets in me that gives me my sense of direction. Their cry for justice, their abhorrence of idols, their fidelity to a God who is beyond all image, yet who works and calls us in human history to real equality, community, and personhood. That's what makes me tick." The Biblical witness, liberally and imaginatively interpreted, is what has always made our communities "tick" - and part of my own ministry is about trying to wind up the mechanism again before it runs down completely.

I don't like taking on the role of the prophet of doom but the prophet within me feels very strongly that all we value as genuine liberals is at present being seriously threatened. On the one hand it is by those secular materialists who believe nothing except in the cynical misuse of their own power to further selfish ends and, on the other, by those who want a literalistic exclusivist religious orthodoxy imposed upon us - be that orthodoxy Christian, Muslim or any other faith. An, whilst there are any of

fine organizations we can join in the secular world who are tackling the cynical secularism of our age there are few groups who are tackling the religious right on their own terms. That's our responsibility. It is up to people like us in this church to challenge them and I think one of the best places to start is by reading Buehren's book and then going back to our Bibles. We mustn't allow our religious faith and traditions to be stolen from us. We live them or lose them. So today we give thanks to our brothers and sisters in Indonesia and elsewhere in the world who continue to inspire our own efforts to continue to live lives inspired and nourished by the Biblical witness which will always offer us new light and truth in our search for God, love, justice and mercy.

Amen.