

A NON-PROPHET ORGANISATION?

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In his memoir, the philosopher [Norman Malcolm](#) recalls that [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) once observed “that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes (without being facetious).” ([Norman Malcolm in “Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir”, p.28](#))

This thought, to which I will return in a moment, was very much in my mind throughout the process of creating the new website and publicity material for the Cambridge Unitarian Church because, as you have no doubt seen, the logo at the top of the website makes use of a deliberate joke in the form of a play upon the words “non-prophet” and “non-profit”. Both the designer, [Rob Kinnear from the ‘Out of House’ design agency](#), and we hope that the juxtaposed meanings of these homonyms, additionally juxtaposed with three very traditional words, ‘Cambridge Unitarian Church’, will make people stop and chuckle and then wonder what on earth might be meant by this non-facetious joke; to ask, what kind of church would that be like?

Before exploring this question directly, if provisionally, it’s worth noting one of the most attractive things about juxtapositions is that they don’t brow-beat a person with the kinds of pre-determined messages usually given out by churches but are, instead, open invitations to the reader to ask themselves what the juxtaposition might mean, to what might it be pointing or suggesting, and so on.

As [Raymond Geuss](#) points out, such juxtapositions can be particularly helpful in inviting a person, ‘to pay attention to something usually overlooked or taken for granted, which seems to have a unity that upon inspection dissolves. The world can occasionally turn itself inside out or upside down’ ([Geuss, A World Without Why](#)).

So, in the joke ‘A non-prophet organisation’ juxtaposed with the traditional name ‘Cambridge Unitarian Church’, what overlooked or taken for granted thing or things are we asking people to pay attention to and think about?

Well, in the first place it’s the idea that membership of a church community requires from a person a belief in the primary way by which traditional, metaphysical religion has gone about providing the world with ‘answers’ — namely through prophets and prophecies.

The problem is, of course, that this way of providing answers, having the status of coming from some putative, authoritative God, has all too quickly and all too often, turned them into repressive and rigid dogmas which, even when our knowledge about the world has significantly changed, have successfully impinged upon our [our freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today](#).

It's not the case, of course, that in this local church we're unconcerned about the need to seek appropriate, provisional, contemporary answers to life's perennial questions but, to draw upon Rilke's insight found in his '[Letters to a young poet](#)', it's simply that we feel it's always important to be patient towards all that is 'unsolved in our hearts' and to try to 'love the questions themselves' by 'living the questions now' ([p. 35](#)). For many years we have sought to do this by engaging together in critical and creative conversations which genuinely seek to draw and build upon the knowledge and insights of the many rather than upon the pronouncements of any single, charismatic, (self)authoritative figure (whether understood as human or divine). In this community, we have come highly to value the exploratory, tentative footprints made by all kinds of people walking convivially together in creative conversation ('pedesis') more than we do demands that we must all follow some predetermined blueprint imposed upon us by one prophet or another. Here, our faith is rooted in the belief that it is only by working together conversationally upon life's questions that we'll be able to move on appropriately by continuing, again as Rilke said, 'to live along some distant day into the answer.'

In our exploratory, attentive walking together — as scientists, historians, poets and artists — we are discovering more and more that the world in which we live is always open and being endlessly made and remade out of complex flows, folds and fields of natural matter and that indeterminacy plays a vital role in all things. This means that all the details about the future are never fixed in any absolute sense and so we cannot know for certain, in the present, what all aspects of the future will be like. This is especially true when it comes to the complex, indeterminate flows, folds and fields that make up humanity's ever-changing and developing cultural, religious, artistic, technological, political and economic ways of being. Because of this, there can, in truth, be no such things as prophets and prophecies, by which I mean people who can, unerringly and for all time, deliver up to people the eternal truth of how the world will and must be, religiously, morally, politically, economically, financially or ecologically.

Because the future cannot be known in any absolute way (because the future is never already there before us but something always to be made in the present) it is, therefore, up to us always to be doing the best we can now, hand in hand with each other and consciously working within the natural limitations nature has gifted us in this neck of the vast cosmos.

This means that our task is not to become prophets articulating unerring prophecies about the

future but people able to live well in the present—as Rilke said, by living the questions now. The best we can hope for is that this modest, experimental, non-hubristic, inquiringly conversational way of living in the present may at times prefigure in the here-and-now better ways to think about how we might live in the future. Wasn't this, after all, exactly what Jesus did? This means we can only truly live prophetic lives by refusing to be prophets able to utter unerring, true prophecies. Such static, dogmatic prophecies will never, thank heavens, come true because life is always-already more beautiful, complex improvisational, temporary and risky than that.

Now, when you look closely at the historic development of the Unitarian movement we can see that we have always been suspicious of prophets and have instead, and on the whole, preferred exemplars. In his important work 'De Jesu Christo servatore' (1578) our earliest important theologian, [Faustus Socinus \(1539-1604\)](#), rejected the idea of that Jesus was a prophet with a fixed prophetic vision of the future kingdom of God and, instead, he saw Jesus as an exemplary figure showing what a selfless dedication to God (or we might say today 'nature' or 'reality') in the present looked like. As this idea developed and deepened within our communities over the next four centuries the world's great religious figures such as Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha and so on, all came to be seen, at their best, as exemplars and not prophets. To us they became people who helped show us (albeit often incompletely and imperfectly) some of the positive ways humanity might choose to go on their exploratory, conversational way. But, be clear, these figures did not show us—nor ever could have shown—the only way we must go on.

The many ways we actually go on (for we are nothing if not committed to a kind of pluralist cosmopolitanism) are best thought of as lines of movement which are constantly being made and remade in the present as the complex flows, folds and fields of exemplary people (and ideas) knot, conjoin and converse in this way here, and that way there, and so on endlessly. It is this constantly intermingling and mixture which ensures that the future always remains open and is never something finally arrived at because it's something always being woven. If one word runs through the whole of nature like [the word "Clacton-on-Sea" ran through my childhood stick of rock](#), it is the word [futurability](#).

Our fervent hope is that, more often than not, the future will be shaped most powerfully, not by prophets and prophecies but, instead, only by the ongoing collective actions of gentle, well-educated, genuinely free-thinking thinking men and women committed to task of living well through informed, democratic conversation and inquiry.

Let me now turn my attention to the unwritten implication in our non-facetious joke that this is also a 'non-profit organisation'. This appears to be the less theological and religious half of the joke but I hope you will see this is not at all the case.

Being a non-profit organization is a central concern of the radical, progressive religious, political

and ecological vision we're seeking to articulate here. Here, we try never to see people, ideas or natural entities merely as 'resources' from which we can extract some surplus profit for our own individual, or some putative god's, or the church institution's, theological or financial benefit and gain but, instead, to find ways to superadd meaning and worth to every life and every thing in a way that helps us develop a deep sense of being at home together in the world, reciprocally commingled with all other sentient and non-sentient entities.

Holding this view we have become increasingly aware that the capitalist myth (especially in its neoliberal forms) which believes we can, forever and ever, continue to extract from people and the wider world increasing profits via constant production and growth, is destroying both our own well-being and that of the whole planet. As the '[Debt Resisters' Operations Manual](#)' put it '[t]he financial establishment colludes with the government to create rules designed to put everyone in debt; then the system extracts it from you' (p. 1). Given this, clearly one important job at hand—religiously, politically, economically, financially and ecologically speaking—is to resist this kind of world-view by consciously not making a profit from what have been called the world's 'natural resources' but, instead, to be living the kinds of lives where everything is gently and consciously folded back into the life-giving flows, folds and fields of life for the mutual, reciprocal benefit of the whole. Here, we are people who feel, as Greta Thunberg feels, that: '[For too long the people in power have gotten away with ... stealing our future and selling it for profit. But we ... are waking up and we promise we will not let you get away with it anymore](#)'.

But the word 'non-profit' also speaks about what have been called 'spiritual resources.' Christianity (the specific religious tradition out of which our own community was born) has in various ways through the centuries consistently tried to extract some kind of spiritual profit from people via its systematic misuse and abuse of its conception of 'original sin.' It's important to see that the Christian schema of sin operates in a similar way to the loan shark. To rephrase the thought mentioned earlier from the 'Debt Resisters' Operations Manual' we may say the religious establishment has colluded with the theologians to create rules designed to put everyone in religious debt; then the religious system has extracted it from us. We here are all aware that for over two-millennia we have been told we are in spiritual debt thanks to some putative original sin in which we did what any sensible, intelligent, thinking person would have done, namely, to make an attempt to pluck and eat the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Surely, seeking an understanding of in what consists good and evil is a sensible and vital, if endlessly revisable task, and we would have been mad not to try (and continue to try) to pluck, taste and share at the common table in mealtime conversations this tree's most precious fruit?

But, having been convinced by our religious establishments and theologians that this act was a sin, we find that this has only served to put us in debt with an interest rate that was not only exorbitant but infinite. In short, the Christian story was unfolded for/by us in such a way that we

came to believe this debt could only be paid off by the violent execution of a God-Man Jesus who stood in our place whose expiatory death paid off the debt for us. But we have discovered this act of violence didn't pay the debt off at all but, instead, was only an example of selling the debt on in a fashion analogous to the [infamous collateralised debt obligations \(CDOs\)](#) that lay behind so many of the financial crimes of the 1980s to the 2000s and sowed the seeds of the eventual crisis of 2008. This is the spiritual profit (often tied to financial profit in the form of, for example, [indulgences](#)) that formal Christianity has so often attempted to extract from our lives. It's a way of proceeding that makes the PPI scandal or the financial crimes leading up to 2008 look like mere storms in a teacup.

[Let's not forget here, by the way, that Jesus actually asked in his famous prayer that we should be forgiven our debts and not our trespasses. The use of the word trespasses rather than debts was a deliberate attempt to hide from view the Church's spiritual profit motive in which we have for centuries been (mis)sold what we might be tempted to call guilt-edged guilt].

But many people today, are now seeking a different kind of naturalist, religious myth, one that is based not upon destructive spiritual profit-extraction but, once again, upon ideas of true sustainability and endless reciprocal recycling of the common-wealth of nature.

So, all in all, I hope you can see that our joke is genuinely a non-facetious one because we truly are seeking to be a local church community that, on the one hand, refuses to make and/or take a financial or spiritual profit from the earth or from its people and, on the other hand, that we truly believe the best way to proceed is by genuinely seeking to draw and build conversationally upon the knowledge and insights of the many rather than upon the prophecies of any single, charismatic, (self)authoritative prophet.

We are, indeed, a non-prophet/profit organisation in both senses of the word and proud of it.

I hope our non-facetious joke makes a few people laugh; I hope our non-facetious joke makes a few people think that maybe this church isn't necessarily what they thought it might be and that it might (just) be worth checking out; I hope our non-facetious joke encourages a few more people to begin to work conversationally together, living the questions now, gently to shape an appropriate future that knows we must never come to believe, as prophets and their prophecies have all too often claimed, that they have delivered up to all humankind the full and final answer/s.

And lastly, I hope our non-facetious joke allows some people to glimpse that life is much more complex, beautiful, open and creative than the prophets of old have told us and so are able, finally, to allow themselves, joyously and lovingly, to immerse themselves into life's ever-moving, plural plenitude.