

# **“MORE DANGEROUS THAN AN UNANSWERED QUESTION IS AN UNQUESTIONED ANSWER” — A MEDITATION ON THE NEED TO LEAVE BEHIND THE OLD UNITARIAN DOCTRINE THAT “GOD IS ONE” AND MOVE FROM IS TO FLOWING**

*Posted on October 14, 2018 by Andrew Brown*

## **READING: *Guide* by A. R. Ammons**

You cannot come to unity and remain material:  
in that perception is no perceiver:  
when you arrive  
you have gone too far:  
at the Source you are in the mouth of Death:  
  
you cannot  
turn around in  
the Absolute: there are no entrances or exits  
no precipitations of forms  
to use like tongs against the formless:  
no freedom to choose:  
  
to be  
you have to stop not-being and break  
off from is to flowing and  
this is the sin you weep and praise:  
origin is your original sin:  
the return you long for will ease your guilt  
and you will have your longing:

the wind that is my guide said this: it  
should know having  
    given up everything to eternal being but  
direction:

how I said can I be glad and sad: but a man goes  
    from one foot to the other:  
wisdom wisdom:

    to be glad and sad at once is also unity  
and death:

    wisdom wisdom: a peachblossom blooms on a particular  
tree on a particular day:

    unity cannot do anything in particular:

are these the thoughts you want me to think I said but  
the wind was gone and there was no more knowledge then.

# THE MEMORIAL CHURCH

(Unitarian)

CAMBRIDGE

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A feature of Unitarianism is that it is hesitant about speaking of its basis and beliefs. It has found that spiritual experience and growing knowledge lead to growth and change in religious outlook, and it therefore claims the right to be tomorrow what it is not today.

Accordingly this church is founded upon an Open Trust which imposes no doctrinal tests either upon its Minister or its members. They meet together in the spirit which is exemplified in the life and utterances of Jesus, for the worship of God and the service of man.

Unitarians strive for a broader understanding among religious groups. Seeing no virtue in belief merely for its own sake, they endeavour, in a spirit of enquiry, to appreciate truth, beauty and goodness in whatever form of religion or philosophy these may be found.

Anyone accepting this free basis may become a member of this church. There is no ceremony of admission; a roll of membership is kept, and members are invited to sign it. For legal purposes, membership is constituted by the payment of not less than five shillings per annum.

Visitors are cordially welcomed, whether or no they become members. They are invited to make themselves known to the Minister. This implies no obligation to join the church. It is recognised that some people may wish to come and go without being addressed by anyone, and this desire is respected.

The text found on postcards that were distributed to first time attenders to the Unitarian Church in Cambridge during the late 1950s and early 1960s

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**“More dangerous than an unanswered question is an unquestioned answer.” A meditation on the need to leave behind the old Unitarian doctrine that “God is One” and move from IS to FLOWING**

During recent weeks I’ve been exploring with you some of the implications of a phrase that was first used by our own Cambridge community on its publicity during the late 1950s and early 1960s, namely, the freedom, or right, to be tomorrow what we are not today. It was a phrase that, in part, helped me to the ideas which became my long piece for the Sea of Faith with a similar title which outlines what it is in general terms I’m trying to do here as your minister. In the terminology of my piece in a nutshell it’s an attempt to help create appropriately and genuinely free, religious spirits who not only claim the freedom or right to be tomorrow what they are not today but who, following any encounter with persuasive new evidence from the natural sciences and/or good, rational, philosophical thinking, also have the courage, wherewithal and opportunity **actually** to change their minds about various things, including their once deeply held ultimate premises.

Traditional religious communities and church traditions are rarely, if ever, concerned to encourage such an open-ended way of being because they are generally concerned to defend an ultimate truth which they believe has been revealed to them via some form of scripture, tradition or the insight of certain individuals; more often than not it’s a combination of all three.

The Unitarian movement has been no different in this respect. As a form of Radical Reformation Christianity its ultimate premises, its basic doctrines if you will, were first articulated in Poland and Hungary during the mid-sixteenth century. They were that “God is One” and that Jesus was fully human (albeit uniquely and divinely inspired and given a divine commission by that One God to act as the Messiah of the kingdom of peace). As the

centuries have unfolded this doctrine of the strict unity of God has, particularly from the middle third of twentieth century onwards, allowed us to expand our thinking beyond its original, obviously Jewish and Christian beginnings into more pluralistic and universalistic expressions of religion and this is why Cliff Reed begins his book [“Unitarian? What’s That?”](#) with these words:

*The historic Unitarian affirmation God is One is what gave the movement its name. Today, this stress on divine unity is broadened. Now Unitarians also affirm: Humanity is One, the World is One, the Interdependent Web of Life is One. But while Unitarians may share these affirmations, we do so in an open and liberal spirit. And there is a lot more to us than that.*

Understood in the way Cliff does, the traditional Unitarian doctrine of the unity of God (our unquestioned answer) is such a beguiling and attractive idea that I’ve been utterly in thrall to it for most of my adult life. However, although I am still beguiled by the idea of an *interdependent web of life* the bewitching power over me of the idea of the *unity* of God has slowly waned.

But this is to get ahead of myself.

What I can say at this point in my address is that [Wittgenstein](#) speaks profoundly to my situation vis-a-vis the doctrine of the unity of God — and, I imagine, to many of you — when he says: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” ([PI §115](#)).

In a Unitarian setting the unity of God lays deep in our language and, in one way or another, it repeats itself to us inexorably as all our hymns today have revealed. To all intents and purposes this mantra is an essentially a Platonic claim that underlying the endlessly changing and diverse

appearance of the material world, there lies an eternal, immutable and undivided ultimate unity. Though it need not be, it is often the case that this ultimate unity is believed also to be perfectly moral and good.

OK, hold on to this thought while I briefly turn to the most important historian of our religious movement [Earl Morse Wilbur \(1886-1956\)](#). In 1920, in his influential lecture/essay [“The Meaning and Lessons of Unitarian History”](#), he realised that, at first sight, “the principal meaning of the movement has been a purely doctrinal one and that the goal we have aimed at has been nothing more remote than that of winning the world to acceptance of one form of doctrine rather than another.” This doctrine was, of course, that “God is One” — with all its corollaries about the humanity of Jesus etc..

But, as Wilbur dug more deeply into the ebb and flow of our history he felt sure that the “doctrinal aspect” of our churches was, in truth, only “a temporary phase” and that Unitarian doctrines were, therefore, only “a sort of by-product of a larger movement, whose central motive has been the quest for spiritual freedom.” Indeed, his essay begins with a clear statement that, “the keyword to our whole history . . . is the word complete spiritual freedom.” The conclusion he delivered to his own day was that, thus far, we had hardly done anything more than remove certain “obstacles which dogma had put in our way” and had only just begun to “clear the decks for the great action to follow.”

These words reveal that Wilbur was a far-sighted man but, as all people necessarily are, his vision could only stretch so far. The limits of his vision didn’t allow him to do in his own time two important things that he could not see were implied by the general trajectory of his own work.

The first was that he was not able to envisage consistently operating, nor see the need for us to operate, outside a

generally liberal Christian framework. Here are the very last sentences of his 1920 essay:

*Our vital task still remains, in common with that which falls to every other Christian church, the task of inspiring Christian characters and moulding Christian civilization, the task of making men and society truly Christian, the task of organizing the kingdom of heaven upon earth.*

Of course, you must yourself decide whether such a description still works properly for you in our own highly pluralistic and scientifically informed age and context but, for me, it doesn't. Along with an American philosopher called [James W. Woelfel](#) (for whose work I have a quiet admiration) I have to say that "in my own ongoing struggle to make sense of the Christian context of life- and world-interpretation [that I have inherited], I find basic elements of that context which I simply cannot render coherent any longer, and I earnestly wonder how other persons manage to" ([The Death of God: A Belated Personal Postscript](#)). In a nutshell this all means I simply cannot any longer, with a clean heart and full pathos, put my shoulder against the same exclusively Christian wheel to which Wilbur was able to put his own.

The second important thing Wilbur couldn't do due to the natural limits of his own vision was to ask the perhaps shocking, difficult and, for a Unitarian (Christian), almost heretical question towards which his own work seems to me to be inexorably heading when he said that Unitarian doctrines were only "a temporary phase" and therefore, only "a sort of by-product of a larger movement, whose central motive has been the quest for spiritual freedom."

So, with the title of this address firmly in mind, that "more dangerous than an unanswered question is an

unquestioned answer”, here’s the potentially heretical question:

***Is  
the doctrine or dogma of the unity of God which has held Unitarians  
captive for four-and-a-half centuries, in fact, now an obstacle to us  
and do we, therefore, need to clear our decks of it if we are to enable  
the “great action” to follow?***

Before beginning  
to address this huge question the first thing to say at this point is  
that it seems to me we are only being true to “the keyword to our whole  
history . . . complete spiritual freedom” in so far as we can freely and  
without fear ask this question and if, in principle — were the evidence  
to be persuasive enough, of course — to change our minds about the  
doctrine and let it go in favour  
of something more plausible. Although I’ve been intimating that, within  
the Unitarian context, my question might be perceived as being  
heretical in fact it’s not. Here is the great Unitarian Christian  
theologian, minister and scientist [Joseph Priestley](#) writing in a sermon of the 1770s ([“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](#)).

*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.*

For  
Priestley, Christianity was made up of a system of claims about the  
world whose truth could only be determined by a preceding phase of  
genuinely free and open-minded religious and philosophical debate and  
the gathering and analysis of verifiable, empirical data.



In short

Priestley was committed to the possibility that his own ultimate Unitarian Christian premises may, in time, turn out to be false. Indeed I think that, in an age and a time when our forebears' belief in the existence of a morally good, omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient unitary god is becoming less and less plausible to more and more of us we need to emulate the same radical open-minded spirit of enquiry once showed by Priestley and ask ourselves whether or not the evidence and our contemporary experiences indicates we should, at last, let our commitment to the unity of God completely go?

In one

sense this address is finished because the primary thing I want to do today is simply to get this question, which Wilbur could not ask, openly out on our common table for consideration and discussion and to show that in asking this we are being entirely consistent with the Unitarian tradition understood as an historical whole.

But, in another sense, it would be unfair were

I to finish without giving you at least a brief indication of the "great action" I think which could well follow were we able to let go of the old, Platonic doctrine of the strict unity of God. As you know I'm perfectly capable of running through the various philosophical arguments and scientific evidence for this — and doing it in great detail — but I have only a couple of hundred words left so I turn, instead, to poetry in the form of Ammons' poem, "Guide".

In it I

understand Ammons strongly to be suggesting that the "great action" which Wilbur dimly intuited in 1920 is courageously to move away from our original sin of believing our origin and end is in the static unity (of God, or the Absolute, or the Platonic Really-Real) and to move, instead, towards an understanding that everything is always-already in complex movement, is always-already interconnecting, interpenetrating and highly plural; it is to see that there is no single origin, no divine single being or particle at the end of the universe; it is to see

that where there is no movement there are no things, no materiality, no life and so no knowledge. Ammons' words (and for me the contemporary natural sciences and [Lucretius' wonderful poem the \*De Rerum Natura\*](#)) suggest to me we should think long and hard about stopping believing in and yearning for this Absolute Being and so finally to "break off from *is* to *flowing*."

This is what the wind teaches Ammons and teaches me — it's what every flux and flow of nature teaches — that in the static unity of God as our Unitarian forbears understood it and our Christian Platonic culture in general has understood it, we cannot turn around, there are no entrances or exits, there are no precipitations of forms to use like tongs against the formless, no freedom to choose. In that capital "S" Source we find we are really in the mouth of of capital "D" Death.

This strongly suggests to me that by continuing to hold to a doctrine of the unity of God we are not only fundamentally at odds with the apparent nature of things, but we also threaten our other great historic commitment to the freedom and right to change our minds on the basis of good evidence and reason and to become tomorrow what we are not today.

So, to conclude, here's the question once again:

**Is the doctrine or dogma of the unity of God which has held Unitarians captive for four-and-a-half centuries, in fact, now an obstacle to us and do we, therefore, need to clear our decks of it if we are to enable the "great action" to follow?**