

‘WE ARE THE CHRISTIANS WHO MOVE ON’ OR ‘OVERCOMING IS WORTHY ONLY WHEN WE THINK ABOUT INCORPORATION’ – SOME THOUGHTS ON ‘GOD’, ‘VERWINDUNG’ AND ‘ÜBERWINDUNG’

Posted on February 2, 2020 by Andrew Brown

READINGS

1 Corinthians 1:25

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Tao Te Ching (from Ch. 78, trans. Addiss and Lombardo)

Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water.

But when attacking the hard and strong

Nothing can conquer so easily.

Weak overcomes strong,

Soft overcomes hard.

From Tanabe Hajime's God by James W. Heisig: (Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, Bulletin 38, 2014, p.40)

The Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) went through a long and complex development in his understanding of the word 'God' but throughout his life there seemed to be in play one, basic question. Here's how James W. Heisig frames it:

Having reviewed his writings from start to finish, I now think that his question comes down to this: How can I, who feel no need to believe in an other-worldly divine being, recover the impulse to such an idea and describe it, to my own satisfaction, in language that preserves the truth of that impulse without having to compromise my own philosophical impulses?

As we watch Tanabe move away, cautiously at first but then with more confidence, from merely recording the God talk in western philosophers to struggling with what lies behind it, we realize that he never found another term to which it could be reduced without remainder. The idea was simply too rich, too multifaceted, too plural in its expression to allow for such a reduction.

The Christians who move on a meditation by Cliff Reed, written for an **International Council of Unitarian Universalists** Executive Committee meeting, Weston, MA, April 2002

We are the Christians who move on,

leaving behind what cannot be retained:

the creeds written to cement a long dead empire;

the justification for slavery, genocide and witch-burning;

the refusal to hear other people's truth;

an idolised book, a man diminished to a god.

We leave these behind and move on,

not in arrogance, not unaware of tradition's worth,

not creating new bigotries as bad as the old ones,

or so we hope!

We move on, carrying with us the free and timeless heart of Jesus,

faithful to what was said and done in love for liberty by him,

by those who follow him,

by those who give his spirit voice and flesh in every time and place.

We are the Christians who move on,

leaving even the name behind, maybe,

a name that Jesus never knew.

We are the Christians who move on,

Seeking and sharing the divine heart in everyone,

as Jesus did.

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ADDRESS

'We are the Christians who move on' or 'Overcoming is worthy only when we think about

incorporation’ — some thoughts on ‘God’, ‘verwindung’ and ‘überwindung’

During the course of half a dozen recent conversations with people who have joined the congregation in the last five years or so I realised that, because I haven’t spoken about the subject at any length since at least 2013, they were completely unaware about an idea that informs almost everything I do in my role as your minister. Given this it seems to me worth bringing the idea before you again for your continued consideration, particularly today in connection with our own religious community’s continued use of the word ‘God’.

It relates to the question of how we might best overcome and move beyond many of the problematic, supernaturalistic theological ideas that still attach themselves to our inherited religious tradition, namely Christianity and which, often in hidden and obscure ways, continue to influence our European and North American culture’s very destructive ways of being in the world.

Lest anyone be unsure about this, as Cliff Reed, one of our modern movement’s senior ministers, put it in the piece you heard earlier in our readings the Unitarian tradition is one made up of ‘the Christians who move on, leaving behind what cannot be retained’. This was as true at our birth in sixteenth-century Poland and Hungary as it is today and it’s worth reminding ourselves at this point that a key eighteenth-century Unitarian thinker, Joseph Priestley, writing in a sermon of the 1770s said:

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 ([“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.](#))

Although I’m sure Priestley would have been shocked to discover that, thanks to free inquiry, many Christian claims have turned out not to be true (or are, at least, now vanishingly unlikely to be true), I trust that he would still be able acknowledge that we, the modern beneficiaries of free inquiry, have no choice but to continue to move on beyond his (and our own) former beliefs. To do this is no more nor any less than to continue properly and seriously to follow one of [the great watchwords of the Reformation, ‘semper reformanda’ — that the church must always be reformed.](#)

But, assuming this reformist approach is correct (and I do so assume) the question is **how best** to move on?

One popular way of attempting this has been to try to bring about an immediate, wholesale, revolutionary replacement of the many old, problematic ideas with a complete set of new ones and, in so doing, merely setting up a new orthodoxy that fits snugly in the footprint of the old. Following the French Revolution the attempt forcibly to replace Christianity and all understandings of God initially with the ‘Cult of Reason’ (*Culte de la Raison*) and then the ‘Cult of the Supreme Being’ (*Culte de l’Être suprême*) is one such famous example.

Drawing on Heidegger, the contemporary Italian philosopher [Gianni Vattimo](#) would call this hard and forcible way of overcoming an example of ‘überwindung’. But history has revealed that this kind of approach never unfolds as its advocates hoped it would. ‘Überwindung’ never really properly overcomes and moves on because it always leaves in play all kinds of irreducible remainders, whether in the form of ghosts of ideas, unresolved questions, powerful resources etc. that continue to haunt, taunt and threaten to overturn (or undermine) the new orthodoxy. The speedy collapse of the Cults of Reason and the Supreme Being and the subsequent return of Roman Catholicism and belief in God reveals this well. The most startling, recent large-scale example of this was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. This was a society which had attempted to overcome all ideas about God, the divine and the sacred by putting in place, even more rigorously than was attempted in the French Revolution, a new, secular orthodoxy ([see some Soviet posters connected with this at this link](#)). Indeed, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote that ‘Militant atheism is not merely incidental or marginal to Communist policy. It is not a side effect, but the central pivot.’ ([source](#)). But, in the end, the Soviet Union’s attempt at ‘überwindung’ failed to overcome God and religion just as the French revolutionaries had failed before them.

As one recent commentator on the return of religion to the public sphere, not only in the countries which made up the former Soviet Union but across the globe, [Peter Thompson](#) notes:

What all of these things show . . . is that religion as both debate and way of life has not crumbled in the face of an apparently inexorable rationalist, scientific, modernising Enlightenment and the globalisation of the market economy, but retains a potency and strength which remains far in excess of its ability to explain ([Introduction to Ernst Bloch’s “Atheism in Christianity”, Verso Press 2009, p. ix](#)).

Thompson's and my own basic point here is that, when it comes to God and religion, forcible overcoming, *überwindung*, doesn't work. In the end it is an approach that simply creates more problems stresses and strains than it solves and only serves to make the new anti-religious and anti-God ideology highly prone to later chaos, disruption and collapse. Surely there must be a better way of proceeding, of being ourselves Christians who really do move on?

This is why I follow Gianni Vattimo's reading of Heidegger by preferring to find ways to overcome Christianity's problematic supernatural beliefs not by a process of '*überwindung*' but of '*verwindung*'. '*Verwindung*' literally means 'twisting' (as in the twisting of overlapping fibres to produce a rope) but, in our context, it has the sense of 'going beyond' or 'winding out' the old ideas in ways that allow them to be transformed and incorporated creatively into our new thinking. As Heidegger memorably said, 'Overcoming is worthy only when we think about incorporation' ([Martin Heidegger: 'Overcoming Metaphysics' in the 'End of Philosophy', trans J. Stambaugh, Harpur and Row, New York 1973, p. 91](#)). Vattimo called this whole approach '[il pensiero debole](#)', weak thought.

However, as I have often found over the years, 'weak thought' sounds very unattractive to many people — especially those enamoured of and tempted by the language of strength that practitioners of *überwindung* love to use. However, in the sense that counts for us, it's important to be clear that the 'weakness' of 'weak thought' is its very strength. Water is the obvious analogy here as the author of [Tao Te Ching](#) knew ([Ch. 78, Addiss and Lombardo](#)):

Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water.

But when attacking the hard and strong

Nothing can conquer so easily.

Weak overcomes strong,

Soft overcomes hard.

Although this idea has been marginal in the Christian tradition it is important to remember that it is not entirely alien to it as St Paul memorably, if allusively, suggests in 1 Corinthians when he

said that ‘God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.’ (I Corinthians 1:25).

All the foregoing serves, I hope, to indicate why I advocate keeping in our religion and language a great deal that we might be tempted merely to overcome in a strong way (‘überwindung’) — and today I point simply to our continued, explicit yet ‘weak’ use of the word God. It seems to me to be almost self-evidently true that the strong overcoming of problematic, supernaturalist ideas about God by either merely stopping using the word or by banning its use, simply will not work.

So, instead, I encourage here the practice of employing ‘weak thought’ to affect this overcoming by ‘verwindung’ — a transformative, incorporating, rather than destructive, way of ‘going beyond’ it.

As I see it, the religious project underway here is one centred on a shared, free conversation that can help us together unwind our old ideas and stories about God, the divine and the sacred in ways that gift us new interpretations of the same but which don’t flatly contradict our knowledge and understanding in other spheres of our life especially, of course, the sphere of the natural sciences.

Here in this church we provide the opportunity for people genuinely and freely to ask and make attempts at answering the same kind of question [James W. Heisig](#) thought the Japanese philosopher [Tanabe Hajime](#) ([to whom I reintroduced you a couple of weeks ago](#)) asked throughout his life, namely:

How can I, who feel no need to believe in an other-worldly divine being, recover the impulse to such an idea and describe it, to my own satisfaction, in language that preserves the truth of that impulse without having to compromise my own philosophical impulses?

So far, collective human experience has taught us that it is highly unlikely ‘God talk’ is ever going to be got rid of and that, as a word ‘God’ can never be reduced without remainder; it remains ‘simply too rich, too multifaceted, too plural in its expression to allow for such a reduction’.

Given this, if we truly want to be the kind of Christians that are genuinely capable of moving on then we must continue to ensure our community is a place where all our overcomings prove

worthy because they are also always-already incorporations.

To coin a phrase, this is a church community which knows deep in its bones that although the word God is never going to be ‘überwindunged’, the word God might successfully be ‘verwindunged’.

Here we can freely explore together what other kinds of stories we can tell each other about God, the divine and the sacred that can help us to move on and live different and better lives that remain true to the truth of our impulse to talk about God but without having to compromise our own philosophical impulses.

As many of you know, my own twisting lines of free inquiry suggest to me that there’s a great deal (a very great deal) to be gained from articulating religious naturalism based on a re-interpretation of Spinoza’s pantheistic understanding of God as ‘deus sive natura’ — that god-is-nature, nature-is-god — combined with and a new-materialist re-reading of Lucretius’ magnificent first century BCE poem ‘On the Nature of Things’.

You will, of course, have your own preferred lines of free enquiry that will parallel and echo some of my lines of enquiry but run counter to others. But that’s fine because our conversations about these connections and differences are, themselves, at their best anyway, examples of ‘verwindung’ and ‘weak thought’.

Lastly, but far from leastly, in this address I’ve been talking about ‘verwindung’ and ‘weak thought’ in connection with our church and its use of the word ‘God’ but I also think it is the case that only by engaging in a process of ‘verwindung’ and ‘weak thought’ will our civic societies be able to find ways to move healthy and creatively through the next few decades during which we know there will be too many people proclaiming that the only way to overcome our current divisions is through some kind of hard and forcible ‘überwindung’.

In short I conclude simply by expressing my hope that the gentle cry of ‘verwindung’ is heard and heeded not only in this local church community’s conversations about God, the divine and the sacred, but in all our national civic conversations too.