

The Future of Unitarianism

A talk written by Stephanie Bisby
for the 350th anniversary of the congregation of York Unitarians

When I agreed to follow Andrew's talk about the past and present of Unitarians with a few thoughts about the future of Unitarianism, I quickly came to the conclusion I'd drawn the short straw. Andrew, after all, had plenty to base his talk on. There are facts, things we can observe, about the past and present, but what do we know about the future? I don't have a crystal ball. I'm not even a member of the Unitarian Society for Psychological Studies.

Having said that, though, there are quite a few things that most people think they know about the future of religion. And generally they're not very positive. They involve looking at present day trends and continuing the line. According to one survey, churchgoing in the UK fell by roughly 20 per cent in the ten years from 2009 to 2019. Others show slightly different figures but the overall trend is the same. From the statistics it's easy to draw a conclusion: religious observance in the UK is declining at a steady, or even increasing, rate. With the exception of a few evangelical and fundamentalist groups, it's happening consistently across denominations. So we can conclude that, as Unitarianism is one of the smallest denominations, it will be one of the first to disappear.

It's an easy conclusion to draw. Easy and, I believe, wrong.

There are so many things I believe about the future, but I'm going to limit myself to three main predictions. All of which are also based on facts which point in a particular direction, but not quite the same direction as the picture of declining religion and increasing secularisation would suggest.

Unitarians have always been a small group, relatively speaking, but we've also always punched above our weight when it comes to promoting social change. We've always been able to point to a few influential individuals who made a big difference. The anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce, attended a Unitarian chapel; the potter Josiah Wedgwood was a Unitarian and an influential social reformer; as were the authors Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, who used their writing to raise awareness of social issues. That doesn't mean we've always got it right. One of the most significant Unitarian charities of the present day, the Hibbert Trust, acknowledges in the latest edition of our national magazine, *The Inquirer*, that its funds derive in part from slave-owning businesses, and talks about what it's trying to do in reparation. We are human and we make mistakes, but we also strive to improve ourselves and the world, and we make a difference.

Unitarians played a key role in the fight to bring equality for same-sex marriage, and I think it's fair to assume that the next big battleground will be understandings of gender. As a national movement we've just passed a motion to support the rights of transgender people – much needed in the present climate where populist media generate sales by fuelling a sensationalised view of trans women as predators and largely ignore the existence of trans men and non-binary people. I hope and believe that one day this motion – sorely though it is needed in the present day – will seem as obvious as the 1977 motion affirming that our ministry should be “open to all regardless of sex, race, colour or sexual orientation.” And I'll go out on a limb here with my crystal ball and say that I suspect the next cause we'll put our weight behind after that will be legal recognition of polyamorous relationships. While the law now allows any two people to affirm their love and care for each other before God if they so desire, and legally protects their right to share finances and make joint decisions, there is no such protection for those who make a commitment of care to more than one individual, even though this is widely recognised as a very reasonable response to the

decline in lifelong monogamous relationships. It's a controversial prediction, but historically Unitarians have not shied away from controversy.

One area where our drive for change is much less controversial is our insistence on the right of all to live to their full potential, regardless of ability, and the need to ensure fair access to medical treatment. Most recently that's led us to oppose the increasing privatisation of the NHS, but there is much more to be done in this arena and if I had to predict one aspect where we will see significant change it is around recognition and understanding of neurodiversity. Unitarianism has always attracted people who think and see the world a little differently, and so we try to be understanding of and responsive to differing needs.

To summarise, then, prediction number one is that Unitarians will continue to spearhead social change.

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You don't need a crystal ball for my next prediction because it's closely related to the first and it's a direct extension of what's happening in the present. By and large Unitarians care about the environment. It's pretty much a given that as individuals we try to make less of a dent in the planet, but over time I think we will become more involved both in social policy and in research and development to improve our options. We may be few, but a few people have been at the forefront of every big change, and disproportionately many of them have been Unitarian. Unitarian journalist John Naish was one of the first to publish an eloquent and well-researched plea for a move away from the excesses of capitalism towards a more sustainable way of living, in his 2012 book *Enough: Breaking Free from a World of Excess*. I expect to find Unitarians living differently, writing about the change, working and campaigning alongside local organisations like St Nicks and national ones like Friends of the Earth, the Green Party and yes, even XR. I hope and believe we will find Unitarians pioneering new forms of alternative energy as well as more effective recycling and waste management.

So my second prediction is that Unitarians will be at the forefront of movement towards a more ecologically sustainable way of life.

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You might have noticed and perhaps found it strange that my first two predictions are arguably about the secular, rather than the religious sphere. But this is at the heart of why I believe Unitarians will go against the trend of religious decline. While the number of people affiliated with formal religious movements is declining, the biggest growth area in terms of belief is people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” SBNR people, as they are sometimes abbreviated, are described as seekers, explorers, individualists – all terms that feel very familiar to Unitarians – and they currently make up between a fifth and a quarter of the UK population. Their beliefs are varied, but include an openness to more than just a materialist view of the world. They don't go to church, but they find their tribe at gyms and yoga retreats, in conscious co-working spaces and green coffee shops. They love technology, and carve out space for themselves using apps like headspace and calm. They believe in science and they also believe in something more than what present science has explained, and they believe that nobody should tell them what to believe.

All the way back to the discoverer of oxygen, Joseph Priestley, who also happened to be a Unitarian minister, Unitarians have been independent thinkers who straddle the boundary between

the secular and the sacred. Unitarians today don't try to do the right thing because of a belief in a God out there who will bring us to judgment, but because of the beliefs and values we hold in our hearts. We believe in taking wisdom from all religious traditions, but we also believe that no written word can or should take priority over the understanding we derive from our lived experiences. And because of that we are always open to finding new ways of doing things.

Moving to online worship during the pandemic wasn't always easy for us, but it was automatic, because we believe in meeting people where they are. And doing so opened our doors again to any number of people who'd been prevented by distance or illness from being present in our chapels, and we're doing our best to hold that open by continuing to share our services on Zoom each week.

So my third prediction is that Unitarian worship and community will continue to evolve in response to changes in technology and our understanding of science. We may not see a huge increase in formal membership, because that's not where people are at nowadays, but we will see an increase in participation, both in shared action in the physical space, and in online connectedness.

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The Unitarian worldview integrates science and religion, and science tells us of the 'observer effect' - the act of observing any system has an impact on the system observed. The simple act of making these predictions might alter the future. By proposing a future in which people work for a world which is fairer for everyone and a lifestyle which sustains us and our planet, by believing that religion can incorporate and learn from science rather than opposing it, and by thinking about how that future might look, it's hard to avoid taking actions, even if they are the tiniest ones, to bring these things about.

Every day we are creating the future with our thoughts and with our choices. In the end, we can throw away that crystal ball, because the best predictor of the future is what we do now, this moment, and in the moments that follow.