

# Keeping Faith, Changing Faith

If you've ever read Edmund Gosse's account of his religious education in his classic autobiography of Victorian childhood, *Father and Son* (1907), you'll understand why those of more liberal Christian instincts might look on the Plymouth Brethren somewhat warily.

Gosse's father, a leader among the Brethren, had no less an ambition in bringing up the young Edmund than to save his soul. For the boy, it was a painful process.

But, having myself been brought up as a Roman Catholic - a group for which Gosse Senior had nothing but pious expletives - I must say I feel a certain recognition of some of what this boyish education consisted of. My prep school Catholicism, including confession, Latin hymns, catechisms and arcane instruction about Plenary Indulgences, was similarly intense. Like Gosse's, my feelings about it now are mixed.

As Unitarians, we like to think our style is less dogmatic than either of those experiences of religious instruction. That may be true. But we are also very vague. There's almost nothing to sign up to; in fact we positively welcome people who don't believe in God, are having some kind of spiritual crisis, or haven't the slightest idea what they think. Tolerance is one thing we all feel happy about. And if there's one thing we're completely intolerant about ...it's intolerance.

I don't think we can go too far wrong with trying to be tolerant of different religions. But by the same token, I don't think we should make how tolerant those religions are of other faiths, the yardstick by which we value them. Our own tolerance is surely, to some extent, the flip side of a lack of clarity in our own beliefs. Only those who, in the end, don't have very strong views about the distinctions between one faith and another, can be quite so relaxed about the choice between doctrines which are obviously at odds with each other.

As a good Unitarian, I'm happy with the idea that everyone should be allowed to believe whatever they want, and to practice their religion how they like. How, then, should I feel about Gosse's account of his father's religion? It is undeniably pretty damning. He ends his book with a passionate diatribe against the Brethren:

"After my long experience ...I have surely the right to protest against the untruth ...that evangelical religion ...is a wholesome or valuable or desirable adjunct to human life. It divides heart from heart. It sets up a vain, chimerical ideal, in the barren pursuit of which all the tender, indulgent affections ...all that enlarges and calms the soul, are exchanged for what is harsh and void and negative."

Well, that was the 19th Century, and I haven't met any Plymouth Brethren, so I can't claim to know what's happened since. But I did come across a contribution to a psychological conference on post-traumatic stress disorder. It was a paper written by a former member of the Brethren, about the trauma of leaving the movement. It claimed that in 1950, there were about 50,000 of what are called the Exclusive Brethren worldwide. (The Exclusives are the more hard-line of two types of Brethren after a split in the movement in the 19th Century.)

For most of the 20th Century, the Exclusives were led by James Taylor, a New Yorker, and then, after his death, by his son, James Taylor Jr. The latter seems to have been a classic cult leader, autocratic and corrupt. New rules, all supposedly based on biblical authority include a ban on computers and mobile phones, and, in an attempt to avoid contact with anyone outside the movement, advice against having anything to do with flats, semi-detached houses, shared driveways, even shared sewer pipes. The writer comments: "the introspective, besieged mentality of the Exclusives increases year by year."

It doesn't sound good. But despite all this, I have a strange impulse to find something nice to say about the Plymouth Brethren. Something that stops us feeling in any way smug and superior, just because their style seems so strict and definite - and so unlike ours.

Now this desire to defend the Brethren is not entirely intellectual. There's a more personal and emotional side to it. Because I recently found out that my great-great grandfather was one of the founding members of the movement. Andrew Miller was not a professional minister. He started out working in a warehouse in Glasgow, and rose to become a partner in a dry goods business in London. In his religious life he came long way too. He was brought up as a Scottish Baptist. And he was a very enthusiastic one: a few years after he came to London from Glasgow, he founded a chapel off Arundel Square in Islington, where the family lived. He was then a lay preacher. But he decided to change denominations, and join the Plymouth Brethren. The chapel

was closed for a symbolic week, and then reopened as a meeting place for the Brethren, with, presumably, a good number of his congregation also making the change.

Strangely, this was exactly where the young Edmund Gosse lived, off the Caledonian Road. And he would have been three years old at the time the Plymouth Brethren chapel opened. It seems quite possible that the Gosses would have attended the Arundel Square Chapel, and would have heard Andrew Miller preaching. Certainly I can imagine my great great grandfather instructing his children in the same sort of way that Edmund Gosse was taught.

Whilst I would love to have met my great great grandfather, and would hope to have got on well with him, I have a feeling he would have disapproved of my religious outlook - although I'm not sure whether he would have been more outraged at discovering me as a Roman Catholic, as I was brought up, or as a Unitarian.

So how did Plymouth Brethrenism turn into Unitarianism in five generations? Well, Andrew Miller's son, my great grandfather, was a doctor. He would surely have been brought up with instruction in Brethrenism. I don't know what happened in his religious life. But he went to Australia, where he got married. It seems possible that that journey - such a drastic one in those days - might have had something to do with wanting to put some distance between himself and his father as he was growing up. I don't know. I do know that his son Reginald, my grandfather, was brought up as an Anglican, and converted to Catholicism as an adult.

My father was therefore brought up Catholic, and remained a devout Catholic. My mother converted to Catholicism when she married him. I was brought up at Catholic schools, but drifted away from my religion at university, until I discovered Unitarianism.

So since the start of the nineteenth century, my father's family has been Scottish Baptist, Plymouth Brethren, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Unitarian. That averages out at one denomination or religion per generation over a period of two hundred years. Whatever my forebears might have thought about Unitarianism, they would have no right to be particularly surprised to find that I had added to the list.

Changing your faith, or taking one up, or dropping it, aren't simple matters. There are strong feelings involved, and a lot of risk, or so it seems. You are often leaving behind the expectations of your parents, and risking their disapproval. Changing your religion seems to require going back to some pretty basic aspects of your identity, and altering things which you really don't want to tinker with lightly.

But if it's difficult for people to change their faith, it's even harder for religions themselves to change. That's because - in principle at least - religions shouldn't change much. If a religion really does have something to tell us about why we're here, or what life is all about, it can't keep offering new answers and explanations. Otherwise you'd wonder how much today's version is really telling you anything profound.

But religions do change. The Unitarian website tells us that Unitarians are called that because "they affirm the essential unity of humankind and of creation." Well, that may be what we're interested in today, but of course, the word was first coined to distinguish a denomination which had objections to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Those who believed in one indivisible God were Unitarians, leaving the orthodox believers to be called Trinitarians. Similarly, the "Universalist" part of our name also conveniently lends itself to an interpretation that works happily today, suggesting an all-encompassing approach. Whereas it first arose as a description of people who wanted to affirm a belief that everyone, and not just the chosen few, could look forward to an eternity in Heaven.

I haven't heard anyone complaining about changes in Unitarianism - that we ought to get back to that 'good old original Unitarianism', and start laying into the Catholics because they still believe in the Trinity. But just because there's no great longing to go back to our roots, it doesn't mean there isn't a slight awkwardness about such big changes in what Unitarianism is all about. The awkwardness doesn't surface too often, but if you look out for it, it can be found.

There's an excellent book called 'The Elements of Unitarianism', published a couple of years ago, whose author, George Chrystides, was sponsored by a Unitarian organisation - so he isn't completely impartial. I have a feeling that in writing his early chapters, about Unitarians who were passionate about what now seem obscure theological debates, the author was worried that today's readers might quickly decide that Unitarianism isn't for them. He doesn't want to disassociate himself from the founders of the movement, but he does want to distance himself from them a bit. Here's what he says: "some of these debates may, in hindsight, seem obscure and irrelevant to the 20th and 21st century reader, and it is therefore important to emphasize, as subsequent chapters will make clear, that Unitarian thinking has moved on considerably from that of its founder figures." "Moved on" is a nice neutral way of putting it, but begs a lot of questions.

Changes in Catholicism in my lifetime have been more dramatic and controversial. When I was at school, the Catholic church was changing from a Latin mass in which the congregation's role seemed mainly just to be present, to an English one, in which we were clearly being invited to participate. The priest changed direction: from facing the end of the church with his back to the congregation, to facing the congregation, so we could see what was going on on the altar. And there were other changes in the Church: strict rules were slackened: the number of fasting days was reduced. You could even go to Mass on Saturday evening instead of on Sunday.

I remember as a boy feeling that there was a strange lack of discussion about the logical necessity that either the previous rules had been wrong, or the new rules must be wrong. It can't be a sin to do something one day, and perfectly OK the next.

There were many other changes: previously definite teachings were downgraded and then quietly forgotten - indulgences, for instance. (When I was at school, if you said a certain number of prayers in the right frame of mind, you were guaranteed a place in heaven, or for a lesser number, I think you could get time off your stay in purgatory, where you'd be waiting to get to heaven.)

Now I don't really like hearing my slightly satirical tone about all this, because deep down, there's much that I respect, even love, about the Catholic church. It gave me the deepest religious experiences of my life. And although today I disagree with some of what it has to say, I have a sort of admiration for the lack of compromise in how its views are put forward. If you really think something's wrong - and that belief comes from your most fundamental ideas about God - why should you tone down your message just because every liberal on the planet disagrees with you?

And in the same sort of way - dare I say it? - I have a sneaking regard for some qualities which are most often found in the more passionate or evangelical strains of Christianity - however much we Unitarians might 'tut tut' about their dogmatic tone, or their conviction that they alone have the answers.

So to end with - just to irritate you - some good things about the Plymouth Brethren and their like:

Firstly, I think we can be impressed by their lack of worldliness. The Brethren are at pains to keep their worship simple and sincere, and to stop the rest of their lives being dominated by money or material success.

Then there's the fellowship within their community. If you read Gosse's book, you'll see how a group which might appear rather cliquey from the outside, is actually an extraordinarily diverse collection of people from all parts of society, who choose to live closely with each other because of their shared beliefs. Eccentrics, the old and infirm, even those who are a little mad, are accorded the same rights and dignity as the community leaders.

Finally, many of the Victorian churches are blamed today for having tried to convert people to Christianity, which is generally seen as a bad idea. Certainly religious missionary work was an important part of the activities of many churches, albeit not a very effective one. Much more to our liking today, but much less often remembered, was the important work they did in fighting - successfully - for the abolition of slavery, and other social causes. That's an area which any religious group, our's included, could well add to its range of activities.

I think we can't claim to be tolerant of other faiths unless we take a close interest in them. (I'm delighted to see that our new minister is running a study course on Islam already.) And I don't think we need to be uncritical in our appreciation of other faiths. Only by caring enough to try to distinguish between things we like and things we don't, can we engage with their ideas and their followers without patronising them.

And I hope I have convinced you that even in what might seem the denominations which are the least compatible with our own, there will be sincere people to be found - my great great grandfather for one, I'm sure - and religious cultures that offer much we can appreciate.

So I'd like to end by hoping that as we approach a significant change in the life of Essex Church - with the arrival of our new minister - we can do so, mindful that both people and religious institutions change all the time. Change is not something that comes easily to an institution that draws strength from its continuity and the permanence of its ideas. And for individuals too, there's an awkwardness and an unsettling side to responding to a desire to change one's beliefs or forms of worship.

Let us pray for the courage to be open to our own and other people's ideas during this time of change, as we look forward to learning to experience and enjoy new ways of working and worshipping together.