

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian

# Viewpoint



*My Faith as a Unitarian*

*by Rev Jim Corrigan*

Issue 250



Dec 2016

Registered Charity 1040294

## INTRODUCTION

This is the sixth and final contribution to this series: *My Faith as a Unitarian*. Six Unitarians have written of their personal faith, openly, candidly and movingly. No doubt the pieces will resonate differently with readers. After reading the following piece by Jim Corrigan, and all the *Viewpoints* for 2016, which can be found on the NUF website's archives, readers may feel more able to answer the following questions with which we set out at the beginning of the series:

<http://www.nufonline.org.uk/NUF2015/archives.htm>

1. Can a religion with such a diversity of individual faiths hold together?
2. If so, how do we as a movement, and as individuals, move forward?

The writer of the following piece is the first Unitarian Minister to contribute to the series. Like the others, he discovered the Unitarians later in life. To be more specific, he has been drawn to the tradition of James Martineau, which embraces a creedless, Free Christian faith. This approach has broadened his experience and understanding of the Divine working in his life, and as a Minister is helping towards building relationships with the wider Christian Churches, where he ministers, and with other faiths. He feels a sense of renewal and relevance of this liberal Free Christianity as it is worked out in his life and his religious community.

In spite of being socially engaged and active throughout his working life, as well as being a professed atheist, Jim was nevertheless drawn

to explore faith, feeling that there was something missing in his life. The concept of freedom of choice runs through the series. As with the other contributors this element proved to be important for Jim too. Acceptance and respect for other cultures and other faiths is important, but in the end discovering a way to live with integrity whilst building on the roots and traditions of his own culture, offers a coherent way of experiencing and expressing the full flowering of his liberal Free Christian Faith, within the Unitarian and Free Christian tradition.

I would like to thank each of our contributors for sharing their lives and faith with us so generously, that we may go on to digest and explore our own ways of being religious within a religious movement proclaiming the values of reason, freedom and tolerance, with unity in diversity.

Some questions arising from the series are being discussed at length on the *National Unitarian Fellowship's* facebook page and will shortly be added to the NUF's *Unitarian Internet Fellowship's* Forum Page, to which readers can register by following the directions from the front page of the NUF's website: [www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk) . Those who wish to send feedback directly will find my details inside the back cover of this *Viewpoint*. The Conclusion of the series, will be published in February, and will take into consideration each of the six contributions as well as the comments received from you.

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **MY UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**By Jim Corrigan**

I find it difficult to describe my 'personal faith' without talking about my spiritual journey of the past 12 years – because for most of my life I considered myself an atheist. So, what happened to change this? Well, this is why I need to go back ...

I was born and brought up in South Africa in a home without religious faith, by parents who were strong human-rights advocates. My father died while I was young, and I was later sent to an Anglican boarding school, where I became immersed in a daily routine of chapel services. I was baptised and confirmed as an Anglican while at school, but by the time I came to leave, I regarded myself as an atheist, and this remained my position for the next 35 years.

I went on to study English at university, where I developed a life-long love of poetry, particularly religious poetry – especially that of TS Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins. This was, of course, helpful much later, when I came to faith.

While at university, I took part in protests and other campaigns against racial discrimination and apartheid, working with other students, many of whom were Christians – but I felt that I could not believe.

My career was journalism, beginning in South Africa on a local newspaper, and later in the UK, where I moved in 1974. I met my wife in Britain, and as non-believers we married in a Registry Office. We

started a family, and remained living and working in London, apart from a period in the 1980s, where I worked as a newspaper journalist in independent Zimbabwe. My final 17 years as a journalist were spent in the newsroom at BBC World Service in London, before I took early retirement in 2007.

All through my career I was active in struggles for a better world – first as an anti-apartheid activist and later as a trade unionist, in the National Union of Journalists.

It was in the early years of the present century that I began to feel the need for something more to life. I enjoyed my job, my family, and my trade-union work, but the questions began coming: *Is this all there is to life? Is there nothing more?* In truth I was experiencing deep spiritual discontent, and I realised that I needed to explore the spiritual realm, both inside me and in the world outside.

Thus began a search, until I found the Unitarians (through the Internet) and became involved with Golders Green Unitarians in north London in 2003. I was delighted to discover a free faith that encouraged me to explore, which I did with enthusiasm for two or more years, but then discontent returned: I felt the need for something deeper – *could it be God?*

I tried Sufism (the mystical path of Islam) for a while, but increasingly felt that I should at least give Christianity a try – after all, it was the faith that I knew something about. I remembered advice given by the Dalai Lama to an American seeker, who told him he wanted to dis-

cover 'Ultimate Reality'. *So should I become a Buddhist?*, the seeker asked. *No*, replied the Dalai Lama, *you should become a Christian!* The clear implication was that you should not easily give up on the faith that has most resonance for you, and for your culture. This is a message that can be heard again and again from spiritual leaders of the East.

Through reading Reformation mystics such as Boehme, and twentieth-century mystics such as Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Merton, I found myself drawn towards the very heart of Christianity – the encounter with what they called Ultimate Reality or God. I was still having tremendous problems with the concept of '*God*'; but through theologians like Marcus Borg, John Cottingham, and Keith Ward, I came to understand God not as an object '*out there*', but rather as the Spirit that animates all life, which resides in each of us, yet is also present throughout the universe.

About this time, I became involved with the Unitarian Christian Association, because I felt it important to join with others in witnessing to the liberal Christian understanding that I was now experiencing. Meanwhile, through studying the Bible, I began to appreciate better the truths contained in its often strange and difficult stories.

I tried to develop a regular spiritual practice, and found that silent meditation did not seem to work for me. Prayer was more helpful, but was difficult to sustain. It was at this point that I came across Ignatian spirituality, the practice of contemplation (known as '*the Spir-*

*itual Exercises')* developed by Ignatius of Loyola, a mystic as well as the founder of the Jesuits. Meditation in the Ignatian tradition is based not on silence but on the 'word' – essentially on readings from scripture or poetry. It encourages self-reflection, based on the principle that God is to be found 'in all things' (including in oneself). *Where was God at each stage of my life, even in the worst times? ... Who showed me love then? ... How did I come through then? ... Where is God now? ... And what am I called to now?*

I went on to undertake the Spiritual Exercises for a year with the Jesuits in central London, and this prayer discipline has sustained me ever since. The Jesuits were very liberal in theology: they told me that I needed only two things in order to begin the Exercises: first, a sense of God, even if that was simply something within myself; and second, an ability to work with metaphor (particularly the metaphors of the Trinity). I found I could make progress with this approach, but I was also to find that the metaphors began to take on a life of their own.

As my Free Christian faith strengthened, I felt the call to ministry, and I went on to qualify as a Unitarian Minister at Oxford in 2012. At the same time, I trained as a spiritual director with the Diocese of London on a very open and ecumenical course. Now, after a two-year interim ministry in Suffolk, I serve as Minister to the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry, with chapels in Padiham and Rawtenstall.

So what is my faith today, as a Unitarian and Free Christian? I believe

in God as the creator and sustainer of all life, including human life ☞ the God who is present everywhere, including deep within each one of us. But of course understanding the nature of God is way beyond our human abilities: ultimately, God is mystery.

Yet we all *feel* God within ☞ in the ‘prick of conscience’, in feelings of love, in the spur to altruism and self-sacrifice. God’s presence can be discerned in nature, in its beauty and grandeur. We humans have the capacity to choose between a loving and a selfish approach in each moment of our lives ☞ ultimately between the good and the bad. We often fall short. Because of this, I feel the need to seek forgiveness, including forgiveness from God.

Jesus embodies the qualities that I regard as Divine, above all in his self-sacrificing love. By his actions, and through his wisdom teaching, he provides a human manifestation of God. Jesus remains for me a living spirit, to whom I can talk and pray. Although fully human, he reveals the qualities of Divine Love, of God.

Trying to decide whether Jesus was *‘fully God and fully man’* (Trinitarian), or *‘a human who revealed Divinity to us’* (a traditional Unitarian view) was not an exercise that I found to be particularly fruitful. These seem to be no more than attempts to understand a truth that is far more complex and mysterious than we can grasp.

As a Unitarian, I believe that Jesus is not the only ‘manifestation of the Divine’ in human history. I accept that there have been other such manifestations, in the founders of other great world religions, includ-

ing the Buddha, Muhammad, and Krishna. I regard the great, enduring religions of the world with profound respect, and I keep learning from them. However, I believe that, in order to progress spiritually, I have needed to choose a path, a 'way' for the journey. For me, liberal Christianity has provided such a path.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the great British Unitarian theologian, James Martineau, revived the idea that the essence of our faith was 'Free Christian', open and creedless, rather than being defined by adherence to a single theological viewpoint (namely Unitarianism). This was a contentious point at the time, but it is largely because of Martineau's influence that the term 'Free Christian' has remained part of our denominational name. I am attracted to Martineau's concept, partly because it takes me beyond wranglings over the precise status of Jesus and the nature of the Godhead. His ideal of creating an open, non-denominational church where Unitarians, Trinitarians, and those rejecting such labels can worship together – and where all those seeking spiritual sustenance can be welcomed – seems worth striving for still.

As a Unitarian and Free Christian Minister, I feel an urgency to renew the Christian faith, and especially the liberal tradition which seems particularly weak, to make it relevant to young people today (many of whom are attracted to evangelical and Pentecostal-style movements). I try to contribute to the renewal of our Unitarian and Free Christian faith within the broader Christian family. Despite attempts to isolate us by some in the broader Christian family, I was able, dur-

ing my short time as a Unitarian minister in Ipswich, to create organisational links with other churches and with ministers, despite the official exclusion of Unitarians from the umbrella Christian grouping of the town. Of course it is equally vital that, with others, I play a full part in interfaith work.

As a minister I work towards bringing spiritual renewal to the congregations and individuals whom I serve: in worship, in prayer, and in the spiritual disciplines. I would like to contribute, with others, to a deeper theological understanding, building on our theological and intellectual traditions, which I feel we have of late rather neglected. I very much hope to work with other ministers and lay people in the coming years to achieve at least some of these goals for our denomination.

### ***Revd Jim Corrigan***

#### **Comments -**

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the guest editor:

Joan Wilkinson,  
10, Shirley Close,  
Castle Donington.  
DERBY  
DE74 2XB



# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches



Seeking information about the  
National Unitarian Fellowship?

Web site: [www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk)

or

email: [nuf@nufonline.org.uk](mailto:nuf@nufonline.org.uk)