

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Religious Festivals

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Introduction

Following the positive reception of *My Faith as a Unitarian in Viewpoints* published throughout last year, we are hoping that the *Viewpoints* for the next twelve months, on the theme of Religious Festivals, will prove to be of interest again to our members and other readers. There are so many festivals that it would be impossible to cover them all, but we will try to cover some of the main ones.

If any of our readers wish to contribute to this series, with articles ranging from 500 to 1,500 words, please get in touch with me. My details will be found at the end of each publication.

The series begins with a piece by Jim Stearn, a member of Doncaster Unitarian and Free Christian Church. Jim also leads worship in other chapels, particularly in the Yorkshire and East Midland Districts and at no charge, but he does expect the church to make an equivalent donation to SACH, one of his favourite charities. Jim has led almost 90 services and will soon be added to the GA Roll of Lay Preachers and Worship Leaders, having passed the last of the 24 assignments of the Advanced Level of the Worship Study Course, for which we send our congratulations. He considers leading worship a huge privilege and welcomes invitations to fill empty pulpits.

This article is based on a service he led at Doncaster, entitled: 'The Law and the Spirit – a Service for Pentecost and Shavuot'. Many Unitarians prefer to use the term 'spiritual' to 'religious', but Jim illustrates how spirit and spirituality are integral in forming the Christian faith, a religion albeit with many branches and understanding. If you would like to hear more about why Jim is a Unitarian go to: <https://youtu.be/M4d0mlzwCYw> where you will find Jim 6.45 minutes into the video.

Joan Wilkinson

HOLY SPIRIT: FOR WHITSUNDAY

Holy Spirit, Breath of God,
that came to prophet and apostle,
come to us, we pray.

Pour down upon us
as life-giving rain;
make our souls bloom
like the desert.

Rest upon us
as tongues of fire,
kindling our souls
to be beacons of hope.

Come to us as guide,
leading us into all truth,
as Jesus promised.

Come to us as comforter,
raising us when we fall
crushed by an unforgiving world.

Come to us as advocate,
witnessing to love's endurance
when doubts oppress.

Holy Spirit,
touch us with your liberty;
give us the right words to speak.

Make our spirits one with you,
our very selves the vessels of
your being.

*Cliff Reed*¹

“The Law and the Spirit”: The Festivals of Pentecost and Shavuot

The feast of Pentecost can claim to be the oldest Christian festival, even the day that Christianity came into being. It commemorates the Spirit descending into a congregation of people like us gathered just as we do. Unitarians should celebrate this as our greatest festival because everyone at the first Pentecost would have been monotheists (the idea of the Trinity was still three centuries in the future) and it contains all our ideas.



It does no harm to recall the old stories, sadly at risk of being forgotten. The Biblical tradition is that the visitation of the Spirit occurred when 120 of the scattered Jewish followers of Jesus, including the Apostles, gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Shavuot with prayer and worship. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai as recounted in Exodus Chapter 20. This is supposed to have occurred seven weeks and one day after the first Passover which had freed the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt. The word Pentecost simply derives from the Greek for the fiftieth day.

As the Jews settled down to an agricultural life, Shavuot also became their harvest festival, as in the middle-east grain must be harvested in late spring before the arid summer. It is therefore also about bread, something almost as fundamental to Jewish life and feasts as the rabbinical laws themselves.

According to the Bible story, it was ten days since Jesus, who had been intermittently returning to his inner circle in some bodily form, which did not always look like him and according to the Gospel of John was insubstantial enough to pass through locked doors, had finally left his Apostles, having promised them that the Holy Spirit would come to them, and would give them the power to tell people about him.

In that room, something very dramatic happened as described in Acts 2: 2– 4:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

(image from <http://www.swordofthespirit.net/bulwark/may08p1.htm>)

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

When crowds came to investigate the commotion, assuming that it was a drunken revel got out of hand, the Apostle Peter addressed them. He assured them that everyone was sober, it still being morning, told them about what had happened, and then preached about the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is recorded that 3,000 were convinced by the truth of his words and became followers of Jesus.

There had been three distinct phenomena: the great wind, the tongues of fire, and the so-called speaking in tongues.

The mighty wind surely represents “the Breath of God”. The very word “spirit” comes from the Latin for breath, long extended to apply to the animating principle, the vital essence or life force, and so to the innermost soul of a living being. Thus “inspiration” means both simple inhaling and also our arousal to creativity and positive emotions.

In fact, Genesis 2:7 contains a second creation myth that describes God breathing life into man:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Exactly the same story of life being breathed into Adam, the first man, is told in the Koran.

This is a new regenerating inspiration: the great hymn: *Breathe on Me, Breath of God* (46 in HLF) conveys this spiritual dimension:

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Blend all my soul with Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life
Of Thine eternity.

The tongues of fire on the heads of those present are the second metaphor for the Spirit of Life: light, as in our flaming chalice, symbolises our inner illumination or “enlightenment” by the Spirit. In other religious traditions, particularly the so-called “New Age” there is a belief in an “aura” of light surrounding the head, of the whole person, and indicative of spiritual qualities. It is interesting that this is said to be more visible in half-light or gloom, and we can speculate that the freak wind at the first Pentecost would have blown out all lamps and candles. Whatever, light is a great blessing, as is shown in John 1: 2,4,5,9

The same was in the beginning with God...

In Him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not.

That is the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

The Spirit of Life is the spark, the catalyst that ignites the flame which is the inner light in each of us; it is also the fuel that sustains our inner flame, which fills us with its fragrance, and fills our hearts with love, and empowers us to carry its flame in our hearts in this dark, cold world.

Incidentally, graphic depictions of that original Pentecost often show the Dove of the Spirit descending, though it is not mentioned in the biblical account. This iconic metaphor of the descending white dove comes from one specific reading about Jesus being baptised by John the Baptist: (John 1: 32)

And John bore record, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and it abode upon Him.

The third phenomenon of “speaking in tongues”, technically called “glossolalia”, is problematic. It has occurred at many times and places, is associated with intense religious experience, and is not entirely unknown in contemporary Unitarian congregations. It clearly comes from somewhere deep within us. There is a traditional reading: Joel 2: 28

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions:

The combination of speaking in tongues with the great wind and the tongues of fire is so improbable that I doubt that anyone would or could wish to invent it, so if there is any truth at all in the Book of Acts, which is ostensibly historical and often quite prosaic, then something like this did indeed occur.

Pentecost is also known as Whit Sunday or Whitsun, because of the later custom of those baptized on this day wearing white garments. Otherwise red is the colour of Pentecost, symbolising the flames. Priests wear special red vestments for Pentecost services in Catholic and Anglican churches and cathedrals. Sanctuaries are decorated with banners depicting flames, wind, and doves. Churches in Italy disperse red rose petals from the ceiling to symbolize the tongues of fire described in the book of Acts. French churches blow trumpets throughout the service to suggest the Holy Spirit coming with a violent rushing wind.

What does all this mean? These two Bible narratives are fundamental to what our green hymnbook calls “the Judaeo-Christian Heritage” which in turn is foundational to our living faith. The first theme is the story of the God Jahweh or Jehovah ordering Moses to climb Mount Sinai to receive a codex of ten prescriptive commandments burned into two slabs of stone that would govern the chosen people in their quest for nationhood. The second, set nearly 1,500 years later, describes the great visitation of the Spirit to 120 of the faithful worshipping and praying together in that upper room in Jerusalem, and its enduring gift to them of a new moral order based on love and compassion, according to the teachings of the recently executed Jesus of Nazareth.

Both are about how we should live together in society- but what a contrast! The first describes the anthropomorphic, interventionist father-figure God coming in thunder and lightning to impose discipline; and the second theme is set in the immediate aftermath of the life and ministry of Jesus, describing the genesis of contemporary liberal religion, based on the still small voice of the

indwelling but nameless Spirit of Love, Light and Life that inspires each of us to toleration, justice and compassion

I think that the older generation present will share with me the compelling force of the ten commandments, which were instilled into everyone from infancy stealing, lying, wounding and killing are wrong. No one doubted that they were the foundation of all morality, and these crimes are simply wrong.

What happened at Pentecost did not cancel the rabbinical laws; Jesus had repeatedly told his followers to obey these laws. It was not until 30 to 35 years later that the Apostle Paul, who was not present at that Pentecost, excused gentile Christians from many of the detailed dietary and social laws, and that concession did not include the Ten Commandments which remain in force.

A Unitarian sermon one hundred years ago would have contrasted the Old and New Testaments and the spiritual progress between them, confidently seeing the events of Pentecost as a permanent transition into a better, enlightened living religious tradition based on the teachings of the Prophet Jesus. The congregation would be assured that they were at the very cutting edge of this continuing progress, guided along the paths of goodness by the indwelling Spirit in each of us, rooted in the tradition of a great social inheritance of human wisdom but untrammelled by artificial creeds or dogma.

But the morality that was being preached was not entirely that of Jesus: it increasingly embodied a new public ethics was based on the Utilitarianism of the two empiricist English philosophers, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who advocated a moral calculus based on the greatest good of the greatest number. Their heir, the leading 20th century advocate of this allegedly rational ethics, was the character of Mr Spock in Star Trek.

Victorian and Edwardian Unitarian congregations contained many technical meritocrats and local government councillors and officers. At its early best, Utilitarianism was often a great force for good, which achieved great social improvements such as clean water, sewage, power, streets, law and order and even a social safety net for the needy. But it involved the destruction of communities for construction of railways, motorways and now airport runways. These bad things were to be accepted for promised future benefits, which often fail to accrue.

Generations born since the mid-1960s have been brought up on so-called liberal and rational morality, ultimately glorifying hedonistic self-gratification, opening the door to accepting injustice and disadvantage to minorities and individuals and justifying excesses of capitalism in pursuit of consumerism. Many decent citizens are becoming concerned that it is a submissive and even spineless morality, with more of an emphasis on explaining criminal activity than on discouraging it.

We still gather for worship on Sunday, the holy seventh day in accordance with the fourth commandment, which coincides with Christian practice, not Friday like Moslems or Saturday like Jews. No matter - it is still one day per week, and the staggering is handy for businesses. Choose your own Sabbath day, if you wish. The tenth commandment is currently the one most under attack in a secular society in which covetousness, as acquisitiveness and competitiveness, makes the economy go round, and bearing false witness as advertising and political spin, are established and respected norms.

The flaw in the new ethics is that an individual can recognise the rational desirability of everyone behaving honestly, but also recognise that if he makes an exception in his own case he gets rich at the expense of “suckers”. This spawns an ideology derived from Darwinian evolution, the so-called survival of the fittest or what Richard Dawkins called “the selfish gene”, which praises and rewards such selfish thinking and leads to a lack of concern for poorer people at the bottom of the pyramid. We have seen how an obscenely rich man could steal the pensions of thousands of honest people. A parallel influence has been secularisation, leading to many people no longer taking religious constraints into account. Dawkins wants to be considered an ethical atheist, and admits he was appalled to find that Kenneth Lay, the Chairman and CEO of Enron which robbed millions of innocent people of billions of dollars from their pensions and savings, regarded Dawkins as his intellectual hero!

James Martineau sought what he called “the seat of authority”, a firm basis for ethics. He saw the inherent flaws and dangers in both ancient dogma and Utilitarian ethics and developed the idea of a living, compassionate ethical tradition as the basis of ethics, our God-given “conscience” putting the Divine will into action to build a better future. Sadly, “modern” Unitarianism has abandoned his ideas and taken Dawkin’s shilling instead.

I believe that the challenge facing us today is to reconcile the original wisdom in these two religious stories of Shavuot and Pentecost, with each other and with many other stories and approaches, back into the Martineau's transcendentalist synthesis of ethical wisdom. Both themes share a once common festival day. And both are about ethics - how we should live, and what rules should we live? And both exhibit change over time.

What was new in the moral teachings of Jesus was the law of compassion. Jesus exhorted us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and in the parable of the Good Samaritan made it clear that our neighbour was anyone in need of assistance. Jesus proclaimed the so-called Golden Rule, that we should treat others as we should wish to be treated in their place. This ancient common wisdom had also been taught far away by Confucius, and today it is being proclaimed by the theologian Karen Armstrong in her Charter for Compassion to which Unitarians have collectively signed up.

But identifying ourselves with others is only possible after we have recognised their common humanity, and I believe that we recognise the humanity of other people when the Spirit in us responds to the Spirit in each of them. You could express this as when that of God in us responds to that of God in them. I acquired this belief from reading the 18th century philosopher George Berkeley, but it is also found in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and in the writings of the Quaker George Fox.

Many people live in great poverty and deprivation of their human rights; many animals are ruthlessly and cruelly exploited; our beautiful planet is being damaged and laid waste by greed and ignorance. These are now the big moral issues.

Decency, honesty and conscience persist in the vast majority of people who long for higher standards of social morality and try to abide by the ones we possess. We have inherited great moral capital from the past generations of faith which we have drawn on heavily, even squandered much of, but I think it also ever springs anew from the Spirit in everyone.

So we have a festival which began as a celebration of the giving of the Laws of God to the Jewish people, which became a bountiful and happy harvest festival, providing the occasion for a remarkable manifestation of the spirit which in turn became the foundational event of Christianity.

A modern celebration of Pentecost seeks empowerment from the Holy Spirit, deeper intimacy with God, and reinforcement of congregational fellowship. It imparts faith, hope, and a sharing of community based on an awareness of a purpose much greater than individual members.

The renewed gift of the Spirit at Pentecost to you and me, and everyone born ever since, is that it can empower us and oblige us to put the moral teachings of Jesus into action.

Jim Stearn

1. Cliff Reed, *Sacred Earth – Words for Prayer and Reflection* Published by The Lindsey Press 2010.

Three more religious festivals of this period

BELTANE 1st May 2017 Wiccan / Pagan

Before the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century, the majority of the population in this country were country dwellers. Their lives revolved around their crops and their livestock and significant moments, or turning points in the year. The Christian calendar harmonised with these moments too. Country festivals usually became Saints Days but it kept the cycle alive.

The significant festivals for the country dwellers were the winter and summer solstices, the vernal and the autumn equinoxes. Half way between each was yet another festival. Together they were the eight spokes that made the wheel of the year.

Between the spring equinox and the summer solstice was Beltane. Beltane is the beginning of May and is perhaps the most joyous of the festivals. It has survived the Industrial Revolution. Beltane marks the end of Spring and the beginning of Summer. It was the time for the cattle to be driven out to the summer pastures and it came with merrymaking and celebration. The cattle would be driven through the smoke of two Beltane bonfires as a form of purification and to protect them from evil spirits. Often there would

have been a procession around the boundary of the farm, stopping at points to make an offering of grain and prayers for the wellbeing of the land.

Houses were decorated with the May blossom, (hawthorn), sills were decorated with Rowan berries to confuse witches, and garlands of yellow decorated everything.

It was a festival of celebration for fertility for the land, that was mimicked by the marriage of the maiden goddess with the youthful green man. Young people danced around the maypole on the village green and it was a time for marriage or 'Handfasting'. In handfasting the couple's hands were bound together as a symbol of their union.

Beltane survives in our modern-day world. In Knutsford, they have a May Day celebration with a procession of characters escorting the May Queen and her attendants to the Heath for a crowning amongst musicians and dancers. There are no motorised vehicles in the procession and there is a tradition of decorating the May Queen's doorstep with sand drawings. This is just one example. Peebles and Edinburgh are other places that I know of who have special celebrations or bonfires. There are more in Ireland. Beltane or May Day is rooted in our folklore.

Tony McNeile

Vesak or Buddha Day 10th May 2017

This is the most important festival in the Buddhist calendar and commemorates the birth, thought to be in 623 BC, of Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha-to-be, his Enlightenment aged 35, a time when he had extinguished all desire achieved nirvana and become the Buddha, and finally parinirvana, which refers to the death of his body having achieved nirvana at his Enlightenment; this implies a release from the round of rebirths.

The older Theravadin tradition of Buddhism has for centuries celebrated all three events at Vesak but some recent Buddhist schools and different cultures, celebrate just the birth and others only the Enlightenment. However,

in 1950 at the World Fellowship of Buddhists, held in Sri Lanka, the following resolution was adopted.

That this Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, while recording its appreciation of the gracious act of His Majesty, the Maharaja of Nepal in making the full-moon day of Vesak a Public Holiday in Nepal, earnestly requests the Heads of Governments of all countries in which large or small number of Buddhists are to be found, to take steps to make the full-moon day in the month of May a Public Holiday in honour of the Buddha, who is universally acclaimed as one of the greatest benefactors of Humanity.

Buddhists celebrate this most important festival by decorating their houses with lanterns and garlands. 'Vesak cards' are often sent to friends and family. Lay people come together at monasteries or spend more time at their local temple. Just as important are the practices of; Giving in the sharing of food and symbolic offering for the shrine: Virtue by reaffirming commitment to the moral precepts:* Cultivation which includes chanting, meditation and listening to sermons.

In Thailand Vesak lanterns of paper and wood are made and often the ceremonial release of caged birds, which symbolises the letting go of troubles and wishing well-being and happiness to all people. In China dancing dragons are part of the religious celebrations.

In whatever way Buddhist all over the world may celebrate this festival, all agree that this is the most important religious festival in their calendar.

*All Buddhists live by the Five Moral Precepts which are refraining from:

Harming living things

Taking what is not given

Sexual misconduct

Lying or gossip

Taking intoxicating substances eg drugs or drink

Buddhist monks live by ten precepts. The ten precepts are the five precepts plus refraining from the following:

Taking substantial food after midday (from noon to dawn)

Dancing, singing and music, use of garlands, perfumes and personal adornment like jewelry

Use of luxurious beds and seats

Accepting and holding money, gold or silver

JW

Ramadan – 27th May – 25th June 2017

Just as other faith traditions, Islam celebrate their various festivals at specific times through the year. However, these festivals are based on a lunar calendar, which is 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar. This explains the reason for Islamic festivals being celebrated at different times throughout our year. Ramadan, is celebrated on the ninth month of the lunar calendar, which this year will fall between 27th May and 25th June.

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset followed by a nightly feast, known as “iftar”. A sip of water or smoking a cigarette are sufficient to invalidate the fast. Sexual intercourse, swearing and bad behaviour must not take place. Those who are frail in health or pregnant are encouraged not to take part in the fast. Children are encouraged to fast although this is not compulsory until maturity. In preparation for the fast a pre-dawn power food “suhoor”, should be eaten. To break the fast a sip of water and some dates are taken at sunset, following the practice of the prophet Muhammad. The “iftar”, which follows, is shared with family and friends bringing the daily fast to an end.

All Muslims recognise Ramadan as a time of spiritual reflection, examination and intense prayer. Longer time is spent at the Mosque through this period. Donations to charity and feeding the hungry are also important during this month, as can be seen in Doncaster, where young Muslims feed the homeless whilst continuing with their own fast.

Ramadan is the fourth of five pillars of Islam, the others being, the Muslim declaration of faith, daily prayer, alms giving and going on the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

JW

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:

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