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Viewpoint



Religious Festivals

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Introduction

Nick Saunders wrote in reply to the June edition of *Viewpoint*:

'Thank you for the latest edition of the *Viewpoint*, which I found very interesting. I read it on Trinity Sunday so as a relative newcomer to Unitarianism some further explanation of Unitarians' rejection of the trinity would have been useful. With regard to the summer solstice, readers may be interested to know that there is another tar barrels ceremony, at Ottery St Mary in Devon. This is held on November 5 or 4 and may be connected with the Gunpowder Plot but may be earlier, perhaps being seen as a way of cleansing the streets of evil spirits. Similar ceremonies seem to have been quite common in the past in Devon and elsewhere in the West Country. Finally, it was good to have a mention of a Sikh festival given the limited knowledge many of us have of this religion. Whatever one's view of the outcome of the general election, it's also good to see the first female Sikh MP and the first turbaned MP returned to Parliament.

Regards,
Nick'

Editor's reply

Early Unitarians were Protestant and knew their Bible well. As they saw no evidence in the Bible to back up the Trinity, they were able to read the NT especially, with a more open mind as to what Jesus said and did whilst alive. There was no mention of anything which would suggest a Trinitarian view of the world. Of course, it was much more complex, but that did underpin and support their new way of thinking. There was a move, by Unitarians, at this time to see a just and kind God instead of a God of judgement, who demanded atonement for our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Further comments on the above would be welcome or comments on any of the other material included in the *Viewpoint*.

Our contributors for the Autumn months are Colin Mills and Sue Woolley, both who are members of the NUF. Colin writes on 'All Souls' Day and Remembrance Day with Sue Woolley covering Samhain and the 500th Anniversary of Reformation Day. Remembering is common to the religious festivals covered and echoes through the pieces below.

All Souls' Day

By Colin Mills

"Remember me when I am dead / and simplify me when I am dead" [Keith Douglas, war poet, May 1941].

"There is a time for everything" [late 14th century proverb; cf Ecclesiastes 3:1].

"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" [John Donne, metaphysical poet and cleric: Emergent Occasions, 1624].

Whenever there is a belief in the afterlife, religion is involved in the relationship between the living and the dead. To quote from one of the Jewish prayers for the dead: "Have mercy upon him, pardon all his transgressions... Shelter his soul in the shadow of thy wings. Make known to him the path of life". (The annual remembrance for the dead in Judaism is called Yahrzeit or Nachala.) Likewise, Muslims include prayers for the forgiveness of the dead in their weekly prayers.

In early Christianity, there is good evidence for prayers for the faithful departed (or those who were, at least, believed to be faithful members of the church). In the Roman Catholic Church, prayers are said

for the faithful departed to help earn them relief from their suffering in purgatory¹. In the Eastern churches, it is believed that the prayers of the living can help the departed, though the concept of purgatory is rejected. Prayer by the faithful living for the departed is encouraged as helpful, though precisely how they assist the repose of their souls is not explained.

The Church of England's 1549 Book of Common Prayer had prayers for the dead, but such prayers were omitted from the 1552 B.C.P. and denounced in An Homilie Concerning Prayer [Second Book of Homilies, section VII, 1562-71]. The Episcopal Church of the United States' 1979 B.C.P. does include prayers for the dead, and one of the concluding prayers would be appropriate for one whose faith or standing is unknown: "Father of all, we pray to you for *N*, and for all those whom we love but see no longer. Grant them eternal rest. Let light eternal shine upon them. May *his* soul and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen". (I cannot for space reasons go into the position regarding Catholic funeral rites for non-Catholics etc. but there are situations where it can be possible.)

Practice on praying for the dead varies among Protestants: Baptist churches hold that: "dead men receive no benefit from the prayers, sacrifices etc. of the living". The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod holds that it would do no good to pray for someone who has died, whereas other Lutheran churches endorse, or at least do not completely repudiate prayers for the dead. However, the living may gain some satisfaction from knowing that they will be remembered after they have died, and there is the matter of the consolation of the bereaved, which I shall return to later.

The New Testament records the custom of the respectful burial of martyrs, and early church fathers confirmed the importance of honouring the dead. Martyrs' feast days were at first observed locally, but during the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, there were too many martyrs for this to be practical, so All Saints' Day [or

All Hallows' Day] was set apart (on 1st May) in 610 CE. It was not till two centuries later that this festival was moved to 1st November.

“The Christians of those times were in the habit of spending the night before All Saints' Day in thinking about the good and helpful lives of those in whose honour the day was kept, and in praying that they might be like them” (Frances Stewart Mossier, article on Hallowe'en in the Myrtle, 1901).

Many Hallowe'en traditions may have derived from the old Celtic festival Samhain; it is argued that Christian missionaries chose to hold a festival at that time of year so as to absorb native religious practices and assist the conversion of the Celts.

All Saints' Day was one of the holiest and most significant days in the church calendar: it honours “the blessed who have not been canonized and who have no special feast day” [Encyclopaedia of World Religions]. On this day, many Christians visit graveyards and cemeteries to place flowers and candles on the graves of their close families^{2,3}.



Allhallows tide was established as an octave [an eight-day long festi-

val] by Sixtus IV in 1430; this was abolished in the 1955 reforms of the Catholic Church, though relics still exist, for instance in the Church of England which extended it to Remembrance Sunday⁴.

Odilo, abbot of Cluny popularized All Souls' Day which was first celebrated at the monastery in Cluny in 993 CE and spread throughout the Catholic Church by the end of the 10th century CE.

Among Orthodox and Byzantine (Greek) Catholics, there are seven All Souls' Days, generally on Saturdays, because Jesus lay in the Tomb on Holy Saturday. In the Syriac tradition, the souls of the departed are recalled on Fridays because Jesus was crucified and died on Good Friday.

In the Anglican communion, on All Souls' Day the faithful departed are recalled, reminding Anglicans that "we are joined with the communion of saints, that great group of Christians who have finished their earthly life and with whom we share the hope of resurrection from the dead" [Patricia Bays & Carol Hancock, *This Anglican Church of Ours*]. In the Methodist church, "saints" refer to all Christians, and so on All Saints' Day, the Church Universal and the deceased members of the local congregation are honoured and remembered.

For Protestants generally, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day tend to be linked, even fused⁵; however, need this be so? While it is good to remember, those who have made a contribution to the church or the community in general⁶, we all need to deal with personal loss. Whatever the tradition of a congregation, it might be helpful to the community to hold a service at Allhallows tide for the families of those who have died: a time of remembrance can help in the bereavement process. It can help family and friends to express so far unexpressed feelings⁷, and to give thanks or to pay tribute for the life of the deceased.

During the slaughter of the First World War⁸, Pope Benedict XV on

10th August 1915 allowed all⁹ priests everywhere to say three masses on All Souls' Day. The two extra masses were in no way to benefit the priest himself: one was to be offered for all the faithful departed, the other for the pope's intentions, which at that time were presumed to be for all the victims of that war. The permission continues.

During the 19th & 20th centuries, children would go 'souling', rather like carol-singing. The 1891 version contains a chorus and three verses:

[Chorus]

A soul! a soul! a soul-cake!

Please good Missis, a soul-cake!

An apple, a pear, a plum, or a cherry,

Any good thing to make us all merry.

One for Peter, two for Paul

Three for Him who made us all.

[Verse 1]

God bless the master of this house,

The misteress also,

And all the little children

That round your table grow.

Likewise young men and maidens,

Your cattle and your store ;

And all that dwells within your gates,

We wish you ten times more.

[Verse 2]

*Down into the cellar,
And see what you can find,
If the barrels are not empty,
We hope you will prove kind.
We hope you will prove kind,
With your apples and strong beer,
And we'll come no more a-souling
Till this time next year.*

[Verse 3]

*The lanes are very dirty,
My shoes are very thin,
I've got a little pocket
To put a penny in.
If you haven't got a penny,
A ha'penny will do;
If you haven't got a ha'penny
It's God bless you ¹⁰*

Soul Cake Recipe¹¹

Ingredients: 175g (6 oz) butter, softened; 175g (6 oz) caster sugar; 3 egg yolks; 450g (1 lb) plain flour; pinch of salt; 1 teaspoon ground mixed spice; warm milk.

Method: Cream the butter and sugar together in a bowl until fluffy,

then beat in the egg yolks. Sift flour and spices, add and mix to a stiff dough with some milk. Knead thoroughly and roll out, ¼ inch thick; cut into 3-inch rounds and set on greased baking sheets. Prick cakes with a fork and bake for 20-25 minutes at 180 °C / 350 °F / gas mark 4; sprinkle lightly with powdered sugar while still warm.

Another seasonal recipe is pumpkin cake¹².

For the cake: 300g self-raising-flour; 300g light muscovado sugar; 3 tsp mixed spice; 2 tsp bicarbonate of soda; 175g sultanas; ½ tsp salt; 4 eggs beaten; 200g butter, melted; zest of 1 orange; 1 tbsp orange juice; 500g (peeled weight) pumpkin or butternut squash flesh, grated.

For drenching and frosting: 200g pack soft cheese; 85g butter, softened; 100g icing sugar, sifted; zest of 1 orange and juice of half an orange.

Method:

Heat oven to 180C/fan 160C/gas 4. Butter and line a 30 x 20cm baking or small roasting tin with baking parchment. Put the flour, sugar, spice, bicarbonate of soda, sultanas and salt into a large bowl and stir to combine. Beat the eggs into the melted butter, stir in the orange zest and juice, then mix with the dry ingredients till combined. Stir in the pumpkin. Pour the batter into the tin and bake for 30 mins, or until golden and springy to the touch.

To make the frosting, beat together the cheese, butter, icing sugar, orange zest and 1 tsp of the juice till smooth and creamy, then set aside in the fridge. When the cake is done, cool for 5 mins then turn it onto a cooling rack. Prick it all over with a skewer and drizzle with the rest of the orange juice while still warm. Leave to cool completely.

If you like, trim the edges of the cake. Give the frosting a quick beat to loosen; then, using a palette knife, spread over the top of the cake

in peaks and swirls. If you're making the cake ahead, keep it in the fridge then take out as many pieces as you want 30 mins or so before serving. Will keep, covered, for up to 3 days in the fridge.

Remembrance Day

By Colin Mills

Remembrance Day has been celebrated since the Great War (1914-1918) to recall those who died fighting in the Commonwealth armed forces. It is widely observed on 11th November, when hostilities ended according to the armistice signed at about 5:15 a.m. on 11th November 1918.

In Britain, Remembrance Day tends to be celebrated on the Sunday after 11th November; the celebration tends to vary from country to country across the Commonwealth. In Ireland, unionists tend to celebrate Remembrance Day as in other Commonwealth countries. Most Irish republicans and nationalists tend to boycott Remembrance Day because of the role of the British Army during the struggle for Irish independence. The Republic of Ireland celebrates a National Day of Commemoration in July for all Irish people who died in war.

The red poppy has become an emblem of Remembrance Day, rooted in the poem "In Flanders Fields"¹³.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae, May 1915

After reading it, Moina Michael, a professor at the University of Georgia wrote a poem “We shall keep the faith”¹⁴ and swore to wear a red poppy on the anniversary¹⁵.

Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies

That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

Moina Michael, November 1918

The red poppy was popularized over the ensuing three years. Initially real poppies were worn - field poppies bloomed across some of the worst battlefields in Flanders.

The red poppy was adopted by Field-Marshal Haig, who founded the British Legion; a charity which supports servicemen and women, serving or retired, and their dependents, and sells the red poppy. In England, poppies have two petals and a leaf, whereas Scottish poppies have four petals (they are made by different bodies). They are worn to commemorate the sacrifices of our armed forces, or to show support for those serving today.

Recently opposition to the wearing of poppies has developed, because it is believed to marshal support for British military campaigns, and because the wearing of poppies tends to be compulsory, especially for public figures. Some far-right groups have used the red poppy as a symbol of militant British nationalism, while some Muslims have begun to reject it as symbolic of Western imperialism. The red poppy is a symbol of remembrance and hope worn by mil-

lions of people. It is used to recall the colour of field poppies, not the blood spilt in war. It is not symbolic of death or a sign of support for war, nor does it reflect politics, ideology or religion.

White poppies were introduced by the Cooperative Women's Guild in 1932 because of the failure of governments to reduce the world's stockpiles of weapons. The Peace Pledge Union promotes white poppies to recall all victims of all wars: both members of armed forces, and civilians. The message of white poppies is an opposition to all kinds of war as a crime against humanity, and a determination to work for the removal of all causes of war, who comprise over 90% of people killed in warfare.

Purple poppies were conceived in 2006 by Animal Aid: "during human conflicts, animals have been used as messengers, for detection, scouting and rescue, as beasts of burden and on the frontline. The purple poppy raised awareness of these forgotten victims, and has been replaced by the purple paw badge. "One horse has seen the best and the worst of humanity. The power of war and the beauty of peace. This is his story." These words are taken from Michael Morpurgo's book, 'Warhorse', relating the experience of Joey, a warhorse in the Great War.

Space does not permit me to give sources for all my statements in my articles on All Souls' Day and Remembrance Day; suffice it to say that I have searched for material on the internet (including Wikipedia), and the websites relied upon generally give sources for their statements.

¹ (In Catholic doctrine) a place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are expiating their venial (minor sins before going to heaven.

² E.g. Spain, Germany, Poland, Hungary, the Philippines, France, Louisiana (and other parts of the United States)). Czechs often visit and tidy the graves of their relatives, and many Lutherans still visit and decorate their relatives' graves at Allhallows tide.

- ³ <http://www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/all-souls-day> - note picture of graves decorated with flowers.
- ⁴ Remembrance Day was initially known as Armistice Day.
- ⁵ It is sometimes suggested that the origins of All Souls' Day in European folk traditions relate to customs of ancestor veneration.
- ⁶ Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us {Ecclesiasticus 44.1.15}.
- ⁷ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4).
- ⁸ Quotation from Wikipedia: Prayers for the Dead, Roman Catholic Church.
- ⁹ Quoted from Internet – a Google search will throw up numerous recipes.
- ¹⁰ Chorus from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul_cake [three verses at this web-page]
- ¹¹ Several recipes on the internet, from which this is taken.
- ¹² Several recipes on the Internet from which this is taken.
- ¹³ A war poem in the form of a rondeau, written on 3rd May, 1915 by Canadian physician Lt-Col John McCrae. See ... <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/johnmccraeinflanders-fields.htm>
- ¹⁴ See <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/moina-michael-we-shall-keep-faith.htm>
- ¹⁵ She wore a red-petalled poppy at a YWCA conference in November 1918.
- ¹⁶ Sale of the red poppy general begins at about Allhallowstide. The British Legion opposes sale of red and white poppies together, but not wearing them together.

Samhain – 31st October/1st November

by Sue Woolley

The Pagan New Year occurs in the Autumn. It is when Pagans celebrate the festival called Samhain, which literally means 'Summer's end'. It falls on the last day of October or the first day of November, depending on which book you read. In this festival four themes are

interwoven: the end of the harvest, the beginning of the new Pagan year, the honouring of the dead, and the opportunity to take stock of their lives, and make a fresh start.

In ancient times, not only did the Celts believe the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead dissolved on this night, they thought that the presence of the spirits helped their priests to make predictions about the future. To celebrate Samhain the Druids built huge sacred bonfires. People brought harvest food and sacrificed animals to share a communal dinner in celebration of the festival. During the celebration, the Celts wore costumes - usually animal heads and skins. They would also try and tell each other's fortunes. After the festival, they re-lit the fires in their homes from the sacred bonfire to help protect them, as well as keep them warm during the winter months.

A bastardised version of this ancient festival has survived in modern Western society under the name 'Halloween', which when I was small was spelled with an apostrophe between the two Es, to indicate that it was short for "All Hallow's Eve". I find it sad that celebrating the end of the harvest has degenerated into lighted pumpkins, and that the Pagan (and Christian) custom of honouring the dead, at this time of year, has evolved into small children (and adults who ought to know better) dressing up as zombies and ghosts, not to mention witches.

As well as having Pagan origins, Hallowe'en was the first of three days celebrated by the medieval church, the other two being All Hallows (or All Saints) Day on 1st November, and All Souls Day on 2nd November. Anglicans and Roman Catholics still celebrate these days: All Saints Day is "an opportunity for believers to remember all saints and martyrs, known and unknown, throughout Christian history", and All Souls Day is "an opportunity for [them] to commemorate the faithful departed. They remember and pray for the souls of people who are in Purgatory - the place (or state) in which those who have died atone

for their less grave sins before being granted the vision of God in Heaven." All of which is a long way from the Pagan custom of honouring the dead, but the link between the two is interesting.

Quite a few Unitarian churches now hold special services on All Souls Day to remember those who have died in the past year. It is an opportunity to hold them in our hearts and to share our grief at their loss, and to support those who have lost family members and friends.

Another aspect of Paganism is the fact that they embrace the dark side of life as well as the light, rather than sweeping it under the carpet and pretending it doesn't exist. The year is divided up into dark and light halves – the dark half starts with the Autumn Equinox, which is when the nights start getting longer than the days, and finishes with the Spring Equinox, when the reverse happens. They are also not afraid to honour the dead. Samhain is the first festival in the dark half of the year. It marks "a change from the activities of summer to the quietness of winter." I like this acknowledgement of the changing pace of the year; it allows Pagans to slow down and reflect on their lives, which doesn't happen much in most religions. Its place as the Pagan New Year festival also means that it is a time for thinking about the past year, about what was well done, and what was not so well done, and about making plans for the next twelve months.

I think that the stocktaking purpose of Samhain is a very important one that all human beings could benefit from – the injunction, once a year, as I said, to look back on how we have done, what we have done well, what we could have done better, and to make resolutions for the year ahead.

The nearest equivalent to Samhain in the Christian religious year is Shrove Tuesday, the last day before Lent. In the past, people used up all the good things, such as butter and eggs, before they began the Lent fast. To be shroven is to be forgiven, so shrove means "being forgiven". This is the time when many Christians confess their sins and

ask God to forgive them. Some may go to a priest who gives them absolution. Then on the following day, Ash Wednesday, they show that they are sorry for the things they have done wrong. Some go to a special church service where the priest smears a cross of ash on their foreheads. Then they feel that they can prepare for Easter without the burden of sin. But it does not have the same significance for most Christians that Samhain has for Pagans. Also, of course, Pagans (and Unitarians) don't see themselves as inherently sinful, which makes a huge difference.

I wish you all good things for this New Year, and hope it will be a blessed and fruitful one.

500th Anniversary of Reformation Day, when Martin Luther pinned 95 Theses on to the door of Wittenberg Church – 31st October

By Sue Woolley

Five hundred years ago, the late Medieval Church was in a bit of a mess. The papacy had gone through a bad period; it had moved from Rome to Avignon, rival popes had set themselves up in opposition to each other, and the Church was in financial straits too. At the time, St. Peter's Church in Rome was being rebuilt, funded by increases in ecclesiastical taxation, which were increasingly resented by European Christians, particularly north of the Alps. Some of the Church's other methods of raising funds were also unpopular: the sale of indulgences, which were supposed to buy the soul remission from purgatory; income from vacant livings; and the practice of simony i.e. creating new posts and selling them.

This is not to say that the entire Church was corrupt, but there were some very questionable practices going on. In addition, all church ser-

vices and the Vulgate Bible were in Latin, the language of the Church and of scholars, which most people could neither understand nor read. The Bible did not play an important part in Church worship; a few key passages were read out in Latin by the priest, but the congregation did not know what the words meant. Their main function was to witness the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Bible was not, but not, for study by the laity.

Which brings us to Martin Luther, granddaddy of the Reformation. Five hundred years ago, on 31st October, this Augustinian monk famously nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg church. This act is generally agreed to have signaled, the start of the Reformation.

For me, one of Luther's main achievements was the translation of the Bible into German, so that the people could read it for themselves. By all accounts, it was a brilliant success, selling about 200,000 copies between 1522 and 1534. His Old Testament appeared in 1534. At last the German people had access to a complete Bible, written in clear, readable German, that they could understand, and so discover God's word for themselves. Luther's example was followed by other brave pioneers throughout Europe, and by the end of the sixteenth century, it was possible for the majority of people in Europe to read the Bible in their own tongues. These vernacular Bibles also had a profound influence on the formation of the languages they were written in.

The printing press enabled more books to be published in the vernacular, which in turn led to a sort of virtuous circle: the more books that were available, the more people were likely to be able to learn to read, and hence educate themselves. Unitarianism is a most unusual faith, in that it evolved simultaneously in many countries at about the same time. To quote Alfred Hall: "men living in different lands, under different conditions, with different experiences, aided only by their own earnest study of the Bible and their spiritual endeavours, arrived at the Unitarian position. Thus, it had an independent origin in the minds of various individuals and communities in England, America,

Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland, France, Switzerland, Italy, Russia and other countries in the West.” In other words, people were studying their Bibles, and finding no evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity (which had been accepted as orthodox Christian doctrine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE). So, they rejected it, going back to their Bibles to find out what Christianity had been like in the earliest days.

And we’re still in the process of reading and discerning and making independent judgement today, which I think is splendid.

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 editor:

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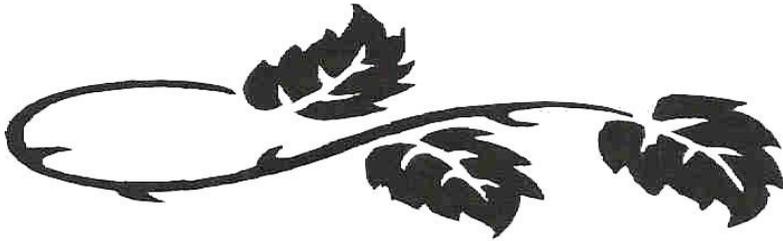
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