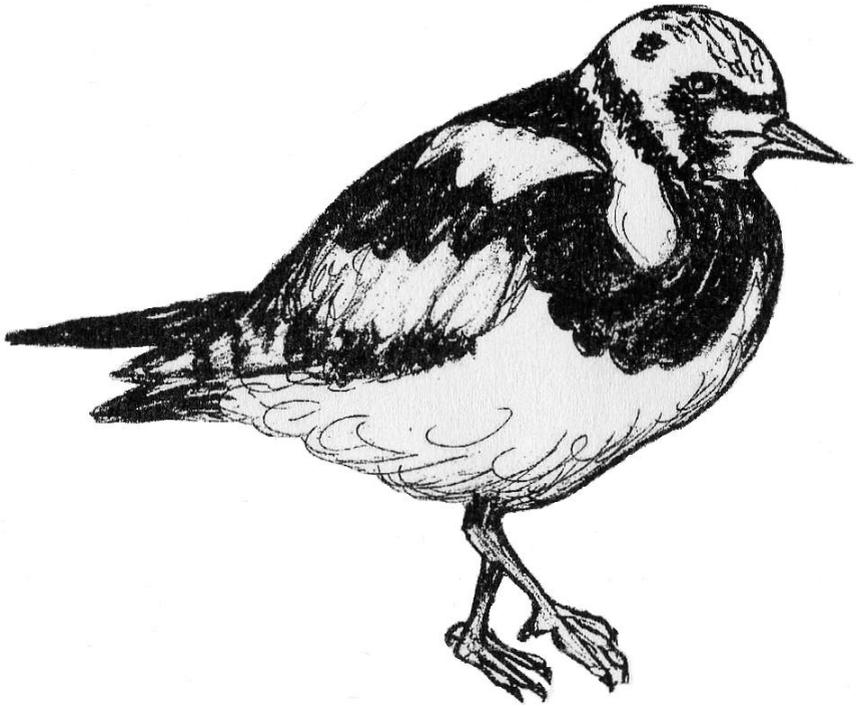


NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

NEWSLETTER



Linking others valuing Freedom, Reason and Tolerance in Religion.

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JOHN'S JOTTINGS

I have recently returned from hosting one of my tours which proved to be an eclectic, thought provoking and spiritually uplifting one. This time I accompanied two Americans from Pennsylvania. In the course of our peregrinations we visited the Jewish museum in Manchester, originally built as a synagogue in the Spanish style by Jews escaping persecution in Spain. A past member was Chaim Weizman, a Russian Jew, who emigrated to Britain to become a research chemist at Manchester University before becoming the first president of Israel. We also attended a Pentecost and confirmation service in Nottingham's Roman Catholic cathedral. Later in the tour we visited the Anglican parish church in Steventon, Hampshire, of which Jane Austen's father was rector. Amongst a number of outstanding National Trust properties, we visited Quarry Bank Mill at Styal, Cheshire, with its Unitarian connections. My guests also had a knowledge of Elizabeth Gaskell and are avid viewers of BBC productions of Cranford and Pride and Prejudice. Also on our itinerary was the ancient stone circle of Avebury in Wiltshire which I consider to be, if anything, even more impressive than Stonehenge. What rituals were actually practised there is still the subject of conjecture but there is no doubting the sense of spirituality that it still evokes so many millennia later. In the space of two weeks, my guests were able to experience some of the amazing variety of history and landscape to be found in this country. Culture-wise we managed to fit in the RSC's production of King Lear at Stratford which was a tour de force. All this without even setting foot in London! We are really fortunate to have such a rich heritage to share.

This year's NUF Weekend at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow will be from Friday 5th to Sunday 7th November. The theme is: 'Asking the Big Question; Where is our place on the Spiritual Spectrum'. On the evidence of last year's weekend, I would encourage any NUF member to attend. Not only was it a most stimulating and enjoyable experience, the fellowship (as you would expect) was also very much in evidence. The Derbyshire Peak District in which we will reside is beautiful at any time of year. Those who wish to can join in a walk in the area on the Saturday afternoon and attend the service in the chapel, on the Sunday morning. You will find a booking form inserted with the Newsletter or you can book online at www.nufonline.org.uk by clicking on the message on the bar at the bottom of the front page which you can print off. It would also be helpful if you were to contact Elizabeth Barlow, NUF Treasurer, advising her if you are planning to come. Her contact details are on the back cover. As always, feel free to contact me at any time with your suggestions or concerns by letter, email or telephone call.

John Greenwood

Cover picture: 'Turnstone' by Liz Egeback Foxbrook (See Reflections p. 4-5)

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Winter

Is it too early to look back on last winter and consider it sagely without an involuntary shiver? The strongest impression that remains in my memory is of how quickly the community came together in face of trouble and stayed together. After the first snowfall the main roads were mostly gritted by the local authority. However, many people do not live on a main road and the roads up the hillside were blocked. It took a week to dig out all the cars and then things began to move slowly. Supplies were wobbly and Tesco and Asda deliveries did not get through. Bread supplies ran out and the village baker, the only one left, did a bakerthon and baked 5,000 oven bottom muffins in a week. At a nearby village which has a gastro-pub but no baker the chef rolled up his sleeves and soon 12 types of bread were being sold at the bar.

Everyone seemed to be ringing someone else with offers to help or with enquiries. Parents dug pathways to school; even llamas at a local farm carried fodder up the hillside.

Amidst all this a local character suddenly died. He was known as 'Farmer George', was a bachelor and had once had a small farm. He had no car and was well known for cadging lifts after his horse died. He delighted in singing dialect songs in the pubs and in giving dialect recitals to anyone who would listen to him. His funeral was arranged by a distant cousin but then it was cancelled because the hillside graveyard was inaccessible. A second funeral was arranged for the following week. Still the snow blocked the narrow lane. The situation was getting desperate. Friends borrowed or begged the use of a snowplough and with a coffin and three wreaths balanced on the levelled scraper blade, the Vicar and bearers attending, they somehow made it to the graveside. The fifty or so mourners who had made it, albeit on foot, listened to CD's of 'Farmer George's songs in church and said how he would have laughed if he had known what his last cadged lift would be.

My other outstanding memory is of the intense cold and the intense pleasure of the warmth. We were shielded from so much of the direct raw elements more than our ancestors were. We are not used to it.

It is the warmth though that remains dominant in my memory. The Warm-heartedness of the community, full of goodwill and offering direct help towards its individuals and at the end of the day the blessed warmth of fire, food and home.

Warmest wishes,
Dorothy Archer

'And he warmeth himself, and saith
Aha! I am warm I have seen the fire.'

THE MINISTER'S MUSINGS

We were all shocked by the shootings in Cumbria. People going about their everyday tasks killed in an instant. Many of them killed at random. Some killed for a reason - but there is never a good reason to take another person's life. Was it all because one person could not cope with the challenges and failures of their life? That fear of the consequences of what they had or hadn't done was so great that this was seen as the only way out.

We sit in our arm chairs and shake our heads in disbelief. The communities involved will be scarred for ever. It will be difficult to look anyone in the eye again and there will be an underlying suspicion and fear of any eccentric behaviour.

No doubt there will be many reports published about this sad event - about the lifestyle of the killer; the responses of the police and emergency services; the keeping of firearms and so on.

I wondered if there would also be a report into the way our society operates. We seem to live in a way where there is so much loneliness and lack of belonging. There seem to be so many people subscribing to 'Two's company' in the newspapers. So many ads for dating agencies and marriage brokers. People under pressure at work or under pressure to find work.

Many people have to outperform in life and yet they must also conform with life according to a set of artificial norms set by the 'modern lifestyle'. They have to keep up a front and pretend there is nothing wrong with life. Many have to live a life of fleeting relationships and it is difficult to say that life is bad. And if they do, they do not believe anyone will really listen?

Hardest of all is to face up to things - to look the tiger in the eye and do something about the problems and the fears that are the truth of life. Often the decision that has to be taken is known and sometimes we have to admit defeat and ask for help.

If only we could live truly in community where people do care about one another and where they 'look out' for one another. I believe that our lives as independent individuals still need that bond of being part of a real community - one that is more than a post code. Strange though, that when you ask for help, it is given. Strange too that when you take the big decision you often come out a better person and a happier person. I hope we can all try to listen and if we need to talk, we will.

Tony McNeile

REFLECTIONS AFTER THE STORM

"Love comforteth like sunshine after rain."

Shakespeare

There was a pestilence amongst the birds, their throats so swollen they could neither swallow nor sing. Within hours the sparrows and the pied wagtails toppled from their nests or fell starving from the sky. Then the waders, the fulmars and the big herring gulls, too exhausted by hunger to fish or fly, lay inert on the sand and amongst the rocks, their useless wings hanging like November leaves drooping from fog chilled trees.

The pigeon feeders brought them bags of seed and corn, but there were few birds of any kind still able to eat. Young people in white coats and thick gloves gathered up sick birds, put them gently into wicker baskets and took them away. Unlike the gulls newly cleaned from spilled diesel oil who had come back to the beach at the beginning of Spring shining-feathered and plump with good food, none of the plague stricken birds were returned.

Many of the winter migrants, frightened by the great sickness and cursing their Goddess Rhianonn for punishing them for sins unknown, flew back early to their summer homes, risking the bitter hazards of that unseasonable journey and breeding grounds not yet fit to sustain them. Many of the gulls, convinced that the spreading of the plague was the work of humans, wrecked their gardens and attacked their children. In retaliation humans came with guns and shot every seagull they could find - it had been a massacre. The pigeon feeders wept, and the few gull survivors screamed their protest against the wind, and then they too left the shore.

The air was menacing, unnaturally warm as the copper sun sank into the early Spring sea, and the Turnstone was afraid. In her carapace of rich brown, with neat black collar and white shirt, she was an elegant bird, quick and sure in her scavenging, flicking over debris and stones with her short powerful beak, unworried by chivvying pigeons and disgruntled herring gulls. This evening, as every evening, she flew up far above the beach to the concrete bridge across the steep-pathed Gap and settled down on a high ledge where the remnant of her flock roosted, well away from the unwelcome attentions of small boys and other predators. But she did not sleep.

When dawn came, chill and grey, the exhausted Turnstone thought that this day might be her last. Looking down from her high perch she saw a procession of humans led by a tall, lean old man in a shabby brown cloak who looked up at the roost and smiled at the bedraggled flock. "Fly down my brothers and my sisters," he called. "We come with wholesome food and a powerful medicine to protect you." One by one they fluttered down on to the outstretched hands. Very gently the old man inserted a tiny dropper into the Turnstone's beak. "There, little one," he whispered, "very soon you will fly strong again; you will build a new nest and rear your fledglings. The beach will ring with the crying of gulls and the staccato autumn song of your returning flock." He laid his wrinkled cheek against her neat head. "Have faith and hope, my sister; the storm is past; love is come again."

Naomi Linnell

THE CHARNWOOD FELLOWSHIP

What began as the odd ‘putting the world to rights’ and debating ‘does God exist / is Jesus divine’ over coffee with an old friend, eventually became a small group gathered under the auspices of the Unitarian Fellowship, guided initially by Chris Goacher. I would say that most of us in the group have reached an age when we sit comfortably in our own skins and have gone through, at least for me anyway, the daring to question long established belief systems, and now enjoy that freedom to explore ideas and concepts, or in the words of *The Hitch Hikers Guide To The Galaxy*, ‘the world, the universe and everything!’ Our group meets in my friend’s home once a month, which provides a relaxed and safe place for us to share together our individual perspectives on our journey through life, respecting each other’s thoughts and therefore not having to fear the possibility of hurting someone’s cherished beliefs.



A few of the New Dishley Society and Charnwood members mentioned in the article.

In the days before I had the courage and temerity to leave orthodox religion, I used to belong to a Bible study group, but had to leave because my doubts and probing questions genuinely disturbed and upset some of the members.

The Charnwood Fellowship comprises some who have always been Unitarians and who play an active part in the organisation. They are used to reason playing a large part in evaluating assertions concerning human value systems. One of us still belongs to a traditional church; another has travelled from agnosticism,

through a conversion experience to her current reasoning status; I started off very orthodox but the OU, reason and The Sea of Faith played a big part in encouraging me to think for myself; another was an Anglican minister but is now a Unitarian minister and joins when he can. So from differing starting points we find ourselves together in our common journey. Occasionally we are joined by visitors who inject fresh insights and challenge our opinions or make us aware of different histories. For example, a group of Leicestershire farmers, of the 'New Dishley Society', came one evening and told us about Robert Bakewell, a farmer and early Unitarian, who existed before Darwin and against the church's teaching of the time, used scientific methods to breed the famous Longhorn cattle. The farmers were interested to learn about his Unitarian roots.

There is an easy structure to our meetings. We begin by lighting the chalice candle which is on a low table in the middle of the group, and a few short, appropriate reflections are read out. Then in turn, we briefly tell our 'stories' of what we have been doing since the last meeting: how we feel and how we have responded to our experiences. What we have come to realise is that these stories are the meaning of life and that they are a microcosm of the universal human story of all our loves, hates, humour, illness and health, loss and gain, beauty and ugliness etc.

Afterwards one of us will talk about a topic of particular interest to that person. Over the last year or two we have ranged over meditation, complementary therapies, travel stories (current and from past youth), Islamic fundamentalism, Sylvia Plath, Darwin (of course!), Montaigne, famous Unitarian women and women's experiences of the Holocaust . . . all debated with vigour or quiet contemplation. The session is spaced by singing a couple of Unitarian hymns, not I confess my favourite activity as I can't sing and I find the music rather forgettable (sorry!) There may be one or two prayers usually reflecting the theme of the evening.

Finally, the candle is extinguished, the kettle is boiled, and a cup of tea (plus chocolate biscuits if you're not watching your waist line) send us home refreshed mentally and physically, and ready to make the most of this most amazing phenomenon, the story of our life.

Pat Caddick

The weak can never forgive.
Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

Mahatma Gandhi

A MODERN WESTERN BUDDHIST ORDER

The Aukama Trust is a Buddhist registered charity which is based in Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire. The Trust supports two monasteries and a meditation centre. The Trust also publishes several books on Buddhism which are written with the Westerner in mind; they are clear, interesting and without technical jargon.



Allan James

The spiritual head of the Trust is Alan James who has taught the Buddha's path for over forty years. He was born in 1940 and studied physics at London University, later turning his attention to oriental philosophy and religion. He made trips to India but it was back in England that he found a spiritual path and a teacher who suited his purpose.

In 1968 he was ordained as a monk. He later disrobed, then completed his training in Thailand. In 1980 Alan co-founded the meditation centre with Jacqui James and soon realised that there was a need for facilities that would offer full-time training for both men and women. The monasteries and Trust were then set up and a new Buddhist order was established, being the first of its kind in the Western hemisphere.

The monastic discipline is Theravada-based but new, minor rules have been introduced to allow for modern cultural and social conditions. The teachings are, therefore, presented in a way ideally suited to the needs of our own culture. The approach is practical, without ritual, but keeps to traditional Buddhist training in the three aspects of: control of personal conduct, control of mind and the development of wisdom. Insight meditation leads to the growth of understanding. The factors of generosity, service and loving-kindness are stressed and study of the Buddha's original discourses in the Pali Canon establishes a sound theoretical grasp of the teachings.

The daily monastic schedule includes five hours of seated meditation. There is also involvement required in the wide variety of activities which are necessary for the running of the monasteries and meditation centre. This includes running lecture evenings, classes and retreats for lay meditators.

Anyone wishing to become involved in any aspect, to enquire about the books and literature which is available or about the Trust in general should contact: Aukana Trust, 9 Mason's Lane, Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, BA15 1QN.

Michael Ablett



REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY

I hope that in penning these words, I do not give the impression that I like writing about myself. I do not. But, since I am no longer young, and my links with Unitarianism date back to 1947 – long before the arrival of the Flaming Chalice and many other changes – perhaps I may be permitted to reminisce a little.

The first Unitarian minister I met was a man of fine intellect and deeply devotional character, who always insisted strongly that he was a Unitarian Christian. It was not long, however, before I became aware that even within the tiny Unitarian movement in Australia, there were Unitarian Christians, Unitarian theists, Unitarian humanists, Unitarian atheists and perhaps others as well. In Australia, we felt the full force of this situation when, in 1949, the church in Melbourne became outspokenly non-theistic and has remained so ever since.

All this was very confusing for us newcomers to the movement, but I had great respect for the Unitarian Christian minister, and when I did part of the G.A. Lay Pastor's course – disrupted by a distressing period of unemployment – and, later, the whole of the Lay Preacher's course, I knew that most of my tutors in the U.K. regarded themselves as Unitarian Christian.

In due course, I was able to establish links with Unitarian and Universalist Christians in the U.S.A., with the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and with the Unitarian Christian Association in the U.K. The U.C.A. appealed to me, although I do not think that my heart was ever really in what was being called Unitarian Christianity. After some years, the Unitarian Christian Association fell into the hands of pro-homosexuals, and I had no choice but to withdraw. As a person with some knowledge of psychoanalysis, and as a qualified homeopath, I do not believe that this is the direction which any profound and sensible religion should take.

As I have grown older, and have perceived little of value in Unitarian humanism or Unitarian atheism, and especially since my two devastating, separate bereavements – that of my loving wife (1995) and of my much-loved son (2008), my thoughts about religion have changed. I now believe that Christianity is correctly a religion about Jesus, an amalgam containing within it parts of the teachings of both Jesus and of the Old Testament. To be a Christian, I now believe, requires, at the very least, the adoration of the living Jesus, and, for many hearts, the adoration of the living Mary. Such adoration seems to me to be essential to meet the deep psychological needs of the millions of hearts which long for ever-available expressions of goodness, compassion and chastity.

But, as I have written elsewhere, in my case, my object of devotion is the beautiful celestial saint of Mahayana Buddhism, Kuan-yin, sometimes called 'the Chinese Goddess of Mercy', who is, like the Buddha himself, a wonderful, accessible figure of compassion, goodness and chastity, and of whom I first heard in 1950, when a young Unitarian Christian nervously beginning the study of non-Christian religions. Kuan-yin has captured my heart.

All this is vastly different from the evangelical Bible fundamentalism I embraced as a young teenager during the ghastly years of World War II, but rightly or wrongly, this is the strange and lonely pathway I have been led to follow. These days, in my isolation, I prefer to reject all denominational names, and to call myself simply a Religious Free Thinker. So much has changed within and around me!

Ross Howard

THINGS AS THEY ARE

When Earth's last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried,
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest, and, faith, we shall need it -- lie down for an aeon or two,
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew.
And those that were good shall be happy; they shall sit in a golden chair;
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets' hair.
They shall find real saints to draw from -- Magdalene, Peter, and Paul;
They shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tired at all!

And only The Master shall praise us, and only The Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as They are!

Rudyard Kipling

'The world exists, not for what it means
but for what it is.
The purpose of mushrooms
is to be mushrooms;
wine is in order to be wine:
things are precious before they are contributory.'

Father Robert Cadon

THE UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

The Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) was formed in 1991 to offer a place where the liberal Christian tradition could be explored within our Unitarian and Free Christian community. Through this, we aim to renew and revitalise this tradition, while at the same time providing a resource for the denomination as a whole.

We publish a twice-yearly journal, *The Herald*, as well as regular newsletters for members. Recently we produced a book for use in daily prayer and group wor-

ship *Daybreak and Eventide*, and we're just publishing a new book by David Doel entitled *The Man They Called The Christ*. Other publications are planned.

Events are held each year at different places around the country to reflect the geographic spread of the membership. All members and friends are welcome to join us on these occasions. We also aim to hold at least one Retreat a year, again open to all.

The UCA has grown steadily in recent years and membership now stands at 160. The current moderator (chairperson) is the Rev Alex Bradley, the Principal of Unitarian College Manchester and minister at Syal. Each year, the UCA makes a significant book grant to all first-year ministry students (at both Manchester and Oxford).

Apart from individual members, several congregations are affiliated to the UCA, as is the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (a church with strong historic links to our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination).

We welcome new members from all who want to see the liberal Christian tradition preserved and strengthened within our movement. Membership enquiries to: Rev Andrew Parker at 260 Wood Street, Langley, Middleton, Manchester M24 5GL, or at his email: arp9898@hotmail.com

Jim Corrigan (U.C.A. Officer and editor, *The Herald*)

THE MAN THEY CALLED THE CHRIST

by the Reverend Dr. David Doel.

The UCA is delighted to be able to team up with David in this publication. David's work is both well known and well respected amongst Unitarian and Free Christians throughout the U.K. and this latest offering is certain to be widely appreciated. The book was launched at the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches at Nottingham in April 2010. Copies are available by post.

Further details will be in the next *Herald* (See U.C.A. above) and will be posted on the U.C.A. web site after the launch. A review will be published in a future NUF Newsletter.

THE UTTERMOST DEEP:

THE CHALLENGE OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

by Gracia Fay Ellwood

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there also.

Yea, though I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

Psalm 139

Gracia Fay Ellwood opens this book with a discussion on the nature of her investigation into near death experiences (NDEs), in which a person close to death or actually clinically dead enters an altered state of consciousness. It relies on first hand reports and witness reports. The methods used are 'partly those of the historian and partly those of the law court . . . (without the atmosphere of conflict found in many courtrooms)'. The concept of 'beyond reasonable doubt' seems more appropriate than 'proof' in this context. In fact it goes much further than examining NDEs and includes material on psychical research including cases of possession or reincarnation, the work of mediums and reported apparitions. There are presentations on interpretations of the subject by different schools of thought from the most atheist to Christian fundamentalist. Both these extremes are strongly dismissed however.

Using as a reference point a particular pattern of NDE based on the work of Raymond Moody, reports of NDEs from other sources are compared. The stated purpose of the book is to look for evidence of survival of death. NDEs, it is suggested, may provide a window into what lies beyond death. She states that her viewpoint is that of having a spiritual life but endeavouring to keep an open mind.

Cases of NDEs and similar phenomena such as out of body experiences (OBEs) are presented and discussed. The thing that is consistently claimed to be evidence that the reports are significant is their paranormal elements. Predictions of events, the appearance of people in NDEs who it is assumed are not known to the person experiencing them (the NDEr), facts of which the NDEr is assumed to have no knowledge and apparitions seen by others at the same time and which may also feature in the NDE are some of these phenomena.

Reasons for doubting the reality or significance of particular reports are frequently raised and the impression is created that the author is trying very hard to be even-handed. The consistent message of the book is that the evidence is indeed inconclusive and sometimes flawed but taken as a whole should not be dismissed. She says that those who are dismissive are working from their own assumptions rather than disproving the hypothesis.

This is not an easy book to read. Report after report is presented and it would take more than one reading to relate all the discussion to its reference points easily. There is much academic discussion which some might find discursive. The impression created by this complex and much researched book is one of seeing something through a mist. By saying this I am suggesting that what is there is not just the mist. Much of the argument relating to inconsistencies in purely materialist thinking is illuminating. This book would be most valuable to those already conversant with some of the material. It is nonetheless thought-provoking and opens the mind to much logic that can be applied to the deep question of survival of death.

Chris Barchard

THE DIVINE REPUBLIC

By Francis Terry

I hope that readers are finding these *Newsletter* items from the 1960s just as helpful as readers must have found them all that time ago. Francis Terry seems to make something valuable out of the complexities facing human beings when they try to work out how they express an understanding of that which is other and how that affects the way they behave. How deeply ingrained is our understanding of morality, behaviour, politics, God and religion and how are they linked? How do they change over time? Whilst the details of his piece may not apply today the meaning of it does.

Joan Wilkinson

One thing which makes traditional religion seem old-fashioned and out of touch with reality is the language it uses about kings and kingdoms, and the notions which go with this – God laying down laws of nature for the universe and moral commandments for men, Christ reigning in the Church, religion consisting in loyal and obedient service of the Heavenly King. That may have seemed natural in the ancient East. It is quite out of place in the modern world. We no longer accept slavery as a normal institution. We no longer regard military discipline as a model for imitation. Chairman Mao and President Nkrumah, however intense the ‘personality cult’ that surrounds them, do not exercise naked personal rule but act through some sort of governmental machinery and purport to express the corporate will of a party or a people. We have changed our whole approach to the organisation of society, and can hardly go on thinking of the overall organisation of the universe in terms which are out-dated by our own experience.

The world of nature, on a modern view of it, does not present the marks of strong autocratic rule. We do not think of stars and planets travelling in the exact courses which God prescribed for them, or animals acting according to instincts which God had specifically implanted. The world looks more like a place in which many modes of existence find opportunities to emerge and develop themselves on individual lines and make their own contribution to the total effect. Whatever over-riding control there is, that holds the whole together, it reminds us more of the basic provisions of a Constitution than of the detailed legislation of a government with an active programme and executive responsibility. If the Constitution implies a policy, it is of a very general nature, with little resemblance to the wilfulness of personal rule.

In our moral life, we recognise that it is a false simplification to describe goodness in terms of obedience to commands. It is true that there are particular situations in which it is important that everyone should follow the same set of rules (such as the Highway Code) or should obey the directions of the man in charge. There are also occasions when we see only one line of conduct that satisfies our conscience, and may therefore feel for a while as though we were acting under orders – especially if we are faced by weighty opposition or criticism. But these are

not the cases which show most typically what goodness is. Goodness, when its nature is fully displayed, discloses an element of individuality and personal judgement. We recognise that a good action is characteristic of the particular man who does it – an expression of his personal faith and style of living. In doing a good act, a man may feel as though he were enacting a law rather than obeying one – casting his vote as to what sort of place he would wish the world to be. Indeed, Kant has declared that this legislative quality is the distinctive and essential characteristic of goodness: to act morally is to act on the principle which one would wish to see adopted as the universal law.

Our notions of specifically religious behaviour would often become more genuine and realistic if, instead of referring to personal loyalty and obedience as our model, we thought more in terms of the love and responsibility which a man feels towards his country. In thanksgiving, there is something spurious about language which implies that all the good things in our lives are the result of direct personal gifts of God. But a man may feel a rational gratitude to his country, which does not depend upon this conception of direct gifts: he realises that his gratitude is due primarily to a host of individuals, known and unknown, who, in various ways, have contributed to the advantages which a citizen now enjoys, and even to his own particular share of them; and yet this gratitude is genuinely unified by a sense of the spirit and ideals, and mutual sacrifice and service, which have held the country together. This is not a full or perfect model for our relationship to God (what one model can be sufficient?) but it seems at least more appropriate than the picture of the generous autocrat. So, too, our resignation to the will of God (which is an essential part of religion) would be more reasonable and purposive if, instead of thinking of ourselves as bowing to the decrees of an infallible ruler, we said something like: ‘This is part of the bad state that our country has got into; I must work patiently towards improvement, and endure maltreatment, rather than break out into faction or rebellion.’ Public worship should not be a mass-competition or a parade of government-supporters, but more of a conference between fellow-citizens, in which they try to combine their personal wishes into a common programme and find what are the desires on which they are most deeply in agreement. And the hopes which reach beyond the visible horizon of our lives are essentially social and point towards reconciliation and fuller union with one another.

The habit of associating the idea of God with outworn forms of political organisation has done much to discredit theistic belief, and thereby paralyse the religious spirit in the modern world. The men who reject belief in God are actually protesting, in many cases, against the ‘kingly’ image which they have been taught to regard as essential. That is why it is important to substitute imagery derived from more democratic forms of political organisation. But, while doing so, it is also important to recognise that political organisation is not the only source of religious imagery – perhaps never a satisfactory source, even at its best. Religion still, as always, has to use a great variety of imperfect analogies to express its sense of relationship with what is above us. It can still speak to us of the foundation which

supports our existence, the reason which holds all things together, the kindness which has done so much for our good, the light by which we find our way, the witness of what we do and are, the sympathy which draws all lives into unity, the self-sacrifice by which evils have been overcome, the heart's desire to which, our hopes reach out, the beauty which surprises us, our true self, the goal of our journey, the home to which we are returning from exile, the public spirit of the universe, the truth which we shall see when we have gone through the laundry, the reality to which we wake up out of our dreams and illusions. All these ideas are needed, and none are sufficient.

Francis Terry

VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

Essex Hall welcomed American Ron Cordes on Wednesday 12th May to use the Lindsey Room for some video filming of a comprehensive documentary on the **European influences on the early development of liberal religious thought in America, focusing on Unitarianism and Universalism**. The project is endorsed by the UUA and receives grants from the Unitarian Universalist funding panel. Ron spent some time at Essex Church in Kensington and Newington Green Chapel and also intended to film in Oxford, Birmingham, Leeds and Shrewsbury. He has a long trip to the Continent in August and next year hopes to visit Egypt, Turkey and Transylvania in Romania. It is anticipated that the film will be launched at the UUA General Assembly in 2012. Although with a US focus, hopefully this will be a resource for congregations in Britain to use as well.

Derek McAuley

GOD – A CONFLICT OF CONCEPTS

Some while ago I wrote in these pages that God exists as a human concept, or collection of concepts, but that it is not possible to prove or disprove whether God exists in a more 'real' sense, which is to say 'out there' in an objective form independent of us or whether we conceive of Him or not. Such reflections on the subject are by no means original, except possibly in the stress laid upon *identifying* God and the *properties* of God with the contents of a class of human thought, yet not denying the possibility of a *real objective* God unknown and perhaps unknowable to the human mind.

In short, our formulated concepts, as opposed to vague emotions and sensations, generate meaning for us of God, regardless of whether He exists objectively or not. By emotions and sensations I mean experiences such as feeling the presence of a supreme Being or benign Power in, for example, beautiful natural phenomena. I regard these as essentially religious in nature, a very personal *experienced* religion, but not formulated concepts of a Deity as such.

In Christianity and Judaism there is a variety of concepts about God and His nature, not all of which are logically or naturally compatible with one another. In Islam, the third great monotheistic religion, the problem appears to be eliminated

by a logical refusal to entertain any human descriptions or images of the Deity. Islam, as I understand it, denounces attempts to that end as bordering on blasphemy.

In Christianity the traditional conceived characteristics of God are those of an infinite Being who is supremely good, who created the world, who knows all and can do all, who is transcendent over and immanent within the world, and who loves humankind. This is quite a gallery of concepts for a Being who is characterised at other times as *passing all understanding* and *moving in mysterious ways His wonders to perform*.

To describe God in terms of dogmatic certainty while admitting to being mystified and bewildered by His behaviour seems curiously schizoid. My contention is that the problem stems from ascribing to God qualities that conflict with our experiences of the world as we find it and our concepts for explaining that world in non-religious terms. Such apparent irrationality in humans can doubtless be best understood in its historical and sociological context.

I propose to limit myself in this article to a consideration of just one of the many popular objections to Christian teachings about God's nature - that old chestnut: *If God created the Universe, what created God?*

By nailing its colours to the mast of God, Creator Of The World, Christian theology was perforce driven to the logical entanglement of the *Unmoved Mover*, the *Uncaused Cause*, since nothing outside God could have created God, unless it were greater than the Deity. A logical impossibility. The sceptic's riposte might be: *Yes. And a God who creates Himself is a physical or natural impossibility!* The Christian may then shrug his shoulders and retreat into the proposition that the act of self-creation was spiritual in nature, not physical.

A simpler approach for the Christian theologian would be to accept that the Universe, *per se*, never was created. In one form or another the Universe is Eternal in the Here And Now. Existence is always in the Here And Now, so there is no essential reason to introduce a God to create the world. A Supreme Being or Power which eternally co-exists with the Universe, an immanent Presence, constitutes a perfectly respectable Divinity.

Counting in favour of such a Divinity is a closer relationship with all life forms. Not remote and detached but empathising with life in its problems, armed with a fuller, even perfect, understanding of what they entail, beyond what any finite individual mind can grasp. Further, Supreme Power does not necessarily entail absolute, unlimited power to act without constraint in any direction for any purpose. It can mean simply having greater power than that available to any form of mortal life.

Three major concepts hinder our acceptance of an Eternal Universe, without beginning or end but always in the Here and Now, viz.,

- (i) Nothing or Nothingness,
- (ii) The Arrow of Time,
- (iii) Cause & Effect.

(ii) and (iii) are big subjects in themselves, so I shall confine myself to (i) only in these concluding remarks.

Nothingness can be described only in negatives. Most importantly, it can have no potential to become other than nothing. To introduce potentiality is to specify a 'somethingness', no matter how vague and intangible it might seem. The strongest evidence we have for the impossibility of absolute nothingness is the incredible amount of somethingness we see in the Universe. Set against that is complete absence of 'anything' that might answer to the concept of nothingness. How could there be evidence for it? There is nothing there, by definition.

The nearest approach to it is in a purely subjective sense, namely, the oblivion of personal non-existence - or death, to put it bluntly, if in fact post-mortem is oblivion. It may not be.

Why is there 'something' rather than 'nothing' in the Universe? is a question we sometimes hear. Rather it is a non-question, because the option is not on offer. The answer is TINA. There Is No Alternative. How could there be a Universe consisting of nothing?

So we can see that the supposed alternative is purely conceptual. While concepts of nil, nought or zero are important for many practical and mathematical applications, as a description of a 'possible world' each is a non-starter. Nothingness - a void without borders - is just one among many conceptual confusions which bring us unfortunately to see the world through a glass darkly.

Truly, no God open to rational human comprehension could possibly come into self-generated existence in an environment which has yet to be created.

Gordon Dennington

(Gordon Dennington is a former Chairman and Treasurer of Lewisham Unitarian Meeting and has for some years led occasional Sunday services within the LDPA. He holds degrees from London and Oxford Universities, including a BA in philosophy and an MSc in economics. Retired these many years, he has had wide experience in banking, industry, teaching, and management accountancy, here and abroad, over decades of fundamental changes in our society. History and philosophy have always been his favourite subjects for study.)

ELIZABETH GASKELL BICENTENARY MEMORIAL

All Unitarians are invited to attend the dedication of a pane of glass to Elizabeth Gaskell in the memorial window in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey on Saturday 25th September following the evensong service, which will start at 3.00 p.m. The dedication ceremony will begin about 4.0 p.m.



There will be time to look round the Abbey free of charge before it closes at 5.0 p.m. This event has been arranged by the Gaskell Society who have funded the cost of the design and installation of the window along with a one-off payment for its future maintenance. The dedication will probably have the highest profile of the many events planned for the bicentenary year.
(See 'Web News')

Rev. Ann Peart



O rose, this painted rose
is not the whole
who paints the flower
paints not its fragrant soul

Goliard poet 13th century

A MORALLY DEEP WORLD Part 1

By Lawrence E. Johnson

In *A Morally Deep World* the author seeks to make the case for moral significance applying to more than just human beings.

After a consideration of pain and pleasure in relation to human beings, he moves on to animals, and recounts the various arguments that animals can't feel pain. He believes they can. Since animals lack rationality and language, it was felt that either animals couldn't feel pain, or not to the same extent as humans. Against these arguments he quotes an example given by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) that a horse may be more conversable a being than an infant of a few days old; Bentham remarked that the question is not, 'Can animals reason or talk, but can they suffer?' (Brian J. Ford's delightful book *Sensitive Souls* states that pain can be felt even in microscopic organisms, that mammals, birds and fish can mourn, that all this teeming variety of life-forms have mean of communication - language. Most of the so-called superior qualities which we humans boast of possessing have been around in nature right from the start!) Can animals act morally? An experiment with rhesus monkeys shows most were highly reluctant to obtain food for themselves if doing so involved inflicting pain on one of their fellow monkeys.

From animals the author moves on to species. Recent ideas on the classification of biological species has led to the concept of 'genetic linkages' which persist though undergoing changes through historic time.

Then he looks at ecosystems; the earth, for instance, seen as a living organism, the result of the interactions of non-living and living forms, plus human cultures. As a functional unit the author sees it as having moral significance. He engages in speculation about Ayer's Rock, a sandstone rock set in the plains of central Australia. Why does it (and other remarkable natural features of our planet) deserve our protection? On what grounds could we reject a plan to use the Rock as

road gravel? He considers the Rock's beauty, its importance to the Aborigines, etc. Finally, it is suggested that the Rock is part of our background – it reflects some of our values in our valuing it for its own sake.

He notes that Christianity and the Western tradition tend to lack that holistic approach to the natural world which is a feature of Taoism, and the beliefs of the North American Indians. The latter would reverently pray to the spirits of some game animals they had to kill, explaining their necessity. But the author relies on no religious authority for his views. The idea is noted that humans could be seen as a kind of pestilence which has afflicted the planet threatening its ability to support life. The author is firmly on the side of human beings, stressing the need for a more harmonious relationship with the planet and the biosphere.

George Cope

THE TEMPLETON PRIZE

Pro-religion scientist wins £1m prize



Dr John Templeton, Francisco Jose Ayala and HRH Prince Philip

after Ayala, a geneticist and molecular biologist, received the Templeton prize.

(Photograph: Clifford Shirley)

An evolutionary geneticist and former monk who argues there should be no contradiction between science and religion has won the £1m Templeton prize. Francisco J Ayala (b.1934), a Spanish-born international authority on molecular evolution and genetics, received the honour – awarded to entrepreneurs of the spirit –

at a private reception at Buckingham Palace. The scientist and erstwhile Dominican priest said he would donate the money to the University of California, where he is professor of biological sciences, to support graduate education. He is the author of *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* and is critical of creationism and intelligent design theories. He served as an expert witness in a pivotal US federal court challenge in 1981 that led to the overturning of a law in Arkansas stating that creationism should be taught alongside evolution. He argues that belief in evolution does not rule out belief in God. Ayala said: 'This is a remarkable prize. I hope the recognition it bestows will help propagate the notion that science and religion are not in opposition and that, in fact, they may often be complementary.'

Former winners of the prize – one of the world's largest annual monetary awards, and created by legendary Wall Street investor Sir John Templeton for those who have made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension – include Mother Teresa, writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn and US preacher, the Rev Billy Graham.

(Source: The Guardian)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Personal Journals

I found the article about Thomas Merton by Michael Ablett to be most interesting. Although I have no knowledge of the Catholic faith I found Thomas Merton's Journals spellbinding. Journals have an immediacy that creates a reality of encounter that makes a biography seem bland and detached. Reading Thomas Merton's journals is a gut wrenching experience. It feels like his words are written in blood. Ultimately no-one could fail to be aware of this man's great faith which it accompanied at every step by great doubt and great effort.

I find those who write journals convey a directness that allows for a level of insight that is not present in the story telling format. Krishnamurti and Henry David Thoreau are two of my favourites. However, in my opinion Ralph Waldo Emerson is the greatest exponent. Having recorded all his thoughts, feelings and emotional states every day from his teens, he produced 40 journals plus countless notebooks. In this way he succeeded in recording a lifetime of direct experiences.

When I read Emerson's work which is usually in the form of essays the echoes of his direct experiences are distinct and affirming. Perhaps Emerson's journal writing was a form of spiritual practice. He was descended from a long line of Unitarian ministers and this mind set is also evident in his work i.e. self-reliance, insight and love and kindness are paramount.

Colin Carvel

The Universal and Creedless Communion Service

Regarding 'The Minister's Musings' in the last Newsletter, I feel that Tony was absolutely right to accept the Bishop's blessing. A blessing sincerely given by anyone is a gift, and should be accepted with gratitude.

I went on to think about the question of taking communion. I was an Anglican for a very long time, and took communion as a matter of course. Eventually I gave up taking communion because I felt I could not take part in an essentially Christian rite when I do not believe in Jesus of Nazareth as God. Then I realised that the greater part of all services focused on Jesus rather than God, and gave up on going to church altogether. I looked into Unitarianism and felt that it was where I wanted to be.

There was no Unitarian meeting place in my area, but some time later, a kind lady drove me down to a chapel some distance away. I was dumbfounded to find that the service was a traditional Christian communion. I confess that I took communion, as I didn't wish to appear rude or ungrateful, but I felt very uncomfortable. It is a great pity that Lucy Harris's 'Universal Creedless Communion Service' has not been more widely distributed. It would, if more widely used, resolve my problem, as I do miss the sense of 'togetherness' with other people.

Ruth Nash

Attracting young people to Unitarianism

I am sitting here watching TV Songs of Praise from a Pentecostal Church in South Wales – and the church is FULL, full of young people. What is it that draws young people to this sort of community?

We Unitarians have an excellent message of freedom, tolerance and truth. Why is it only being enjoyed by the elderly? I am a Unitarian and I am OLD and my children all know that I am but not one of them is inclined to follow into Unitarianism.

I have got no answers. Have you?

Hilda Handoll

THE UNITARIAN – NEW EDITOR

Manchester District Association are delighted to announce the appointment of Yvonne Aburrow as the new Editor of The Unitarian with effect from 1st June 2010. Yvonne is our first female Editor. She is a member of the Unitarian Churches in Bristol. She is a web developer and usability consultant in the University of Bath, and edits the website and occasionally the newsletter for the Unitarian churches in Bristol. Yvonne's contact details are below and we ask that all future newsletters from your congregations be sent to her with immediate effect, preferably as a Word or Publisher document or text file attached to an email.

Address: Flat 9, 100 Lower Oldfield Park, Bath, BA2 3HS **Tel:** 01225 425561
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A TALE OF FOUR WORMS

A minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon. Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil. At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results: The first worm in alcohol – Dead. The second worm in cigarette smoke – Dead. Third worm in chocolate syrup – Dead. Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive. So the Minister asked the congregation - What did you learn from this demonstration? Maxine, who was sitting in the back, quickly raised her hand and said, 'As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!' That pretty much ended the service.

Rev Linda Phillips

WEB NEWS

For more info. Re. **Elizabeth Gaskell Bicentenary Year** celebrations:

www.gaskellsociety.co.uk/calend.html

Mel Prideaux's presentation on **intergenerational worship** is now online at:

www.unitarian.org.uk/support/worship-intergen.shtml

We have added some information about the **Chalice Award** to the web site and plan to expand this in July. The page is at:

www.unitarian.org.uk/chaliceaward.shtml

We now have a new page to view all the **congregational videos** on youtube. We do see this as a very good way of getting our message across to a new audience.

The page is at: www.unitarian.org.uk/congvideos.shtml

Information on the **latest two Lindsey Press books** can be found at:

www.unitarian.org.uk/info/news-newbooks.shtml

DIARY DATES

NUF Weekend at Gt. Hucklow 5th - 7th November 2010

Are there any suggestions as to how we should present the theme: *Where is our place on the Spiritual Spectrum?*

UCCN Weekend/Publicity at Gt. Hucklow 25th - 27th February 2011. The theme is: *How to Publicise an Event.*

GA Meetings 2011 15th – 18th April

CHESS CIRCLE

Would any member interested in playing email chess with one or more other members please contact the editor.

NEXT ISSUE

The deadline for the next issue is Monday 16th August 2010. Contributions on any theme and responses to any item in the newsletter are always welcome.

All contributions are acknowledged.