

NATIONAL UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER



In the flow of religious thought and practice,
Unitarians represent openness and inquiry in the spiritual quest.



FELLOWSHIP MATTERS

This publication of this Newsletter marks an important threshold for the NUF in that it is the 400th edition and also the last to be edited by Mark Allaby, who has overseen every edition since no. 357. I have written further of his contribution in the Annual Report that you will receive with this edition. Suffice to say that we have valued above all his reliability in seeing the Newsletter to press for 44 editions.

Profiles of new members of the committee are included in this issue; as there were three nominations for the three vacancies, an election will not be necessary this year. We are grateful to retiring members Melanie Prideaux and Ian Jebbutt for their contributions to the Fellowship. I have been asked by the committee to continue in post as Secretary which I am honoured to do. I am grateful to all the committee for their support, but especially to Joan Wilkinson and Elizabeth Barlow, whose experience of NUF matters has been invaluable.

We are currently researching ways of enhancing our internet presence; while aware that many of our current members may not be frequent users of the Web, there is little doubt that if the NUF and the wider Unitarian movement is to reach the younger generations, our online profile needs to be as good as we can achieve. Thanks to Joan and John Wilkinson our website already brings a steady stream of new inquiries.

Apologies to members who all received subscription renewal slips in the last mailing, in some cases well before they were due – entirely my error! The label on your envelope indicates the month when your subscription becomes due e.g. (x/12); thanks to those members who have already renewed but it will make the task of our treasurer and membership secretary easier if you hold back sending your subscription until nearer the due date.

Special thanks are due to our President, Dorothy Archer, who has sent in both her Annual Report and President's Piece in spite of suffering a fall at home on Christmas Eve, which landed her in hospital during the festive season and has led her to move to a new address. Her indomitable spirit is an example to us all.

Ken Smith

TALKING POINTS

That we are less than five months away from the opening of the Olympic Games is a fact hard to ignore; for the next edition of the Newsletter, I invite members to send me their views on the following topic: Does participation in sport develop fitness of character as well as of body? Is there a spiritual aspect to sport? Contributions (not to exceed 100 words) will form part of a 'Talking Points' feature in the next Newsletter.

Ken Smith

Cover Picture: Photograph by Naomi Linnell

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

It was the end of winter but not yet spring. The sky was wild and the wind gusty and filled with fine raindrops. The gusts swept along the almost empty lane as people made for cover.

We had been shopping and had left the car outside in the lane whilst having a hasty cup of coffee before going out again. Suddenly round the bend of the lane came a young cyclist, head down, pedalling furiously against the wind and concentrating completely on making progress against the elements. It struck both of us at the same moment that he had no notion that his path would take him directly into collision with the car. The moment before the collision time began to run slowly. Then came the bang and boy and bicycle lay sprawled in the road.

Later when all was picked up and mopped up and boy and bicycle recovered we were able to take the boy home.

His father had recently bought the fish and chip shop in the village and the family lived in the flat above. In the shop the father was cleaning up after the lunchtime opening. When all had been explained to him he paused briefly and silently, cleaning cloth in hand, strode to the bottom of the stairs and bellowed, "Mother! He's done it again!"

Learning by experience is a huge topic and something which we use individually to different degrees. There are varying views on its usefulness.

General Eisenhower said, "With some, travel broadens the mind. With others it broadens the bottom." (Anon) "Only fools need to learn by experience."

Sometimes older people think that wisdom automatically comes with age. Sometimes younger people are rebuffed when applying for jobs because they "have not had enough experience".

What is your experience of learning by experience? Do share some of them with us.

May your Eastertide experiences all be happy ones.

Dorothy Archer

'Educate and inform the whole mass of the people... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.'

Thomas Jefferson

'When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it always.'

Mahatma Ghandi

THE MINISTER'S MUSINGS

I do like a mystery. Over the Christmas and New Year ITV 3 had a 'Poirot Weekend' and I recorded nearly all of them - well, until the recorder could take no more. I love them. As far fetched as the stories are, the settings are wonderful - England in the early 30s. The characters are so sophisticated, so chic, so rich, so beautiful. They drive Rolls Royce cars - or open top Bentleys. They move in their own magic world. They all live in stately homes. There are usually two or three murders per episode and they die with such grace and so little sign of violence or blood.

So many have skeletons in their cupboards - usually children born of little trysts long before - but they all have a thirst for an inheritance that has been denied to them. And Hercule Poirot moves amongst them like a snake sent by the gods unravelling their plots and settling the mystery in the last scene with the whole cast assembled in the drawing room. The culprit is dragged away by Scotland yard's Chief Inspector Japp - who misses all the clues - just as I do. Always chooses the wrong person as culprit - just as I do.

I have to declare my addiction to Poirot and that bygone age which was never part of the real world that I have lived in! I don't dress for dinner nor are the doors of the rich and famous always open to me but wouldn't it be good if we were all as polite and courteous to everyone we knew and everyone we met - just as those characters are - even if there are times when we feel we could murder one or two of them. But even then be cautious as Poirot could expose our dangerous thoughts.

Tony Mcneile

SEEKING THE LORD

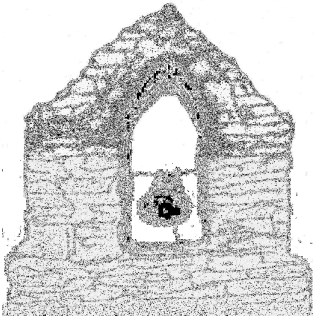
When the Lord sent us into this world, he stole our heart and then looked about for a suitable place to hide with it. "If I hide on the highest mountain," he said, "they will climb it and find me. If I hide in the atom, they will split it and find me. If I hide in the stars, they will spy me out with their telescopes." So the Lord hid in the last place we would ever look - in the very depths of our own consciousness. We all hear his call, we are all looking for him, but most of us don't know where to look. We go to Reno thinking he might be there; we look in the kitchen, in the bar, in the library, in the bank, in our record collection. But the Lord has stolen our heart, and we will never find lasting fulfilment in any of these places; we will find what we are really looking for only in the depths of our own consciousness, in the kingdom of heaven within.

Eknath Easwaran

REFLECTIONS THE ANGELUS

'Love not knowledge is the answer, feeling not logic is the process.'
Charles Davis, Roman Catholic Theologian

They had climbed up to the old shrine - one wall only remained, built into the side of the Reformation chapel, perched high on the cliff above the bay. "Is it alright," asked the Young Man, "when the Angelus bell is rung, for me to pause and say a prayer asking for help of Mary the Star of the Sea?" Reason, a statuesque lady with well cut hair and dainty feet, sighed. She regarded the Young Man with a trace of scorn mixed with the kind of sympathy that those who know themselves to be correct can afford to expend. "No," she said. "It is not reasonable to invoke the assistance of a Jewish mother of uncertain virtue and little education, who was probably simply the construct of a first century radical Judaic legend."



"But," persisted the Young Man, "the spirits of the seamen who linger about this place move me to prayer. I hear the creak of ropes as passing ships dip their topsails in homage to the Lady, and sailors petitioning for her special protection."

"I would not tell you what to believe," said Reason, "but I can ask you to consider this. Your mind is deeply influenced by the superstitious perceptions of centuries of well-meaning but naïve folk. Prisoners all of an ignorant society whose sole recourse was to a learning perpetrated and preserved by a priestly class bent upon maintaining its hold over a compliant laity. Throw yourself into the study of the world around you. There are natural wonders here, enough for a lifetime of study; and a million more tragedies crying out for remedy than can be embraced within the competence of a single man or a single generation. Look to the salvation of this world and abandon the chimera of the next."

"Maybe," said the Young Man. He turned to the Old Person beside him, androgynously resplendent in a long coat of many colours, and battered Ugg boots. "Would you say a prayer to the Lady?" he asked.

"No reason not to," returned the Old Person. "And yet, my reason tells me that Reason is correct. There is so much suffering and sorrow in this world crying out for reform and repair. But, love is what I see with and what I see touches first the heart. The reasoning mind must always be our guide for without it we cannot contrive the good that we would do, but it is the heart that strikes the spark which fires the boiler of compassion. Look," he said pointing across the bay as a great shaft of light pierced the dense mist

over the water. "Does the Lady gives us a sign? Or is that amazing radiance merely a meteorological phenomenon? A sudden off shore breeze, a parting of the sea fret so that the Winter sun for one glorious moment shines through?" He took Reason's hand in his. "So long as we can in conscience each respect the other, does it matter which of us is correct?"

"Perhaps not," answered Reason quietly, "I don't suppose it does." The Young Man put an arm around each of them. "Amen, and thank God for that my brother and my sister."

Naomi Linnell

PERCIVAL'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

"Great God in Heaven!" cried Percival Potts, throwing his copy of the Times down on the breakfast table. "What is it dear?" said his wife, a piece of toast halfway to her mouth. "This!" spluttered Percival, jabbing the paper with his finger. "Some drunken louts beat up an old man in the middle of the town."

"These things happen," said his wife resignedly. "There's nothing we can do about it".

"Humph!" snorted Percival, draining his coffee cup. What was the younger generation coming to? Then, calming down a bit, he said, "I'd better get off; don't want to be late for my appointment."

Twenty minutes later Percival was driving northward on the motorway towards his business appointment in Birmingham. At the age of 58 he was still active in his home village and had been a churchwarden for almost ten years. And oddly, for such a practical man of business, he believed he had a guardian angel. Dangling in the car windscreen was a miniature angel in a white robe with flaxen hair and tiny wings. If he ever met his real guardian angel s/he would look smething like that. Wouldn't it be wonderful if s/he appeared to him someday!

Glancing at his watch Percival decided he had enough time to call in at the next service area for a quick coffee. Turning off the motorway, he parked his car and went into a building with a sign saying, "Eat Here". Inside he found the usual quick food outlets: Macdonalds, KFC, Burger King. The place was crowded with people, and there were long queues everywhere. How scruffy they all looked thought Percival, not a collar and tie between them. What was society coming to? Tut-tutting to himself he decided not to stay for coffee but to drive on and get away from all these unpleasant types he despised so much.

Parked near his car was a battered minibus with a gang of jobs swigging lager from cans. Possibly a pop group on their way to a gig, or whatever they called it. He particularly noticed one of them, an unshaven youth in a grubby tee-shirt with the words 'I Like Sex' printed across it.

Shaking his head in disgust Percival got in his car. He was just about to close the door when someone grabbed his arm and, dragging him forcibly out of the car, snatched the satnav from its mounting. Then, as he lay helpless on the ground, the man aimed a kick at him. But before his boot could connect with Percival's ribs, the assailant was grabbed from behind and sent on his way with a punch to the jaw. "You all right mate?" said his saviour, and looking up, Percival saw it was the lad in the grubby tee-shirt. Percival felt dazed as he was helped into the driving seat. "Put on the central locking," advised the boy, "and I'll fetch you a coffee". When the coffee was brought Percival sipped it gratefully and the boy closed the door and left him.

The hot coffee calmed Percival and he thought, "I must thank that lad for helping me." Getting out of the car he saw the group of youths still standing by their minibus but there was no sign of the young man who had come to his aid. Going over to them he asked where he could be found, describing him to them. To his surprise they shook their heads and said "Nah, he ain't one of us."

"But he was with you!" insisted Percival. But they still shook their heads, and climbing into their minibus they drove off.

That afternoon on returning home Percival decided not to tell his wife about the incident at the motorway service area. And a year later, strange to say, he has almost forgotten about it himself. But he's still wishing he could meet his guardian angel someday.

Jim Fielding

(Jim Fielding is a member of the Gloucester and Herefordshire Fellowships.)

CHARLES DICKENS AT 200

There is currently public interest in Charles Dickens with extensive celebrations of the 200th anniversary of his birth. His Unitarian connections are not well known and merit exploration.

To find out more see the following resources:

Hibbert Trust Assembly on Dickens

www.hibbert-assembly.org.uk/dickens/index.htm

Dickens poster from the "Eminent Unitarians" Series of the

www.unitarian.org.uk/docs/FinishedPosters/EU_charles_dickens.jpg

Recent item on Chief Officer's blog

<http://unitarianchiefofficer.blogspot.com/2012/01/dickens-2012-and-unitarianism.html>

Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography

www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/charlesdickens.html

There is also an excellent article in The Inquirer, 4th February 2012, by Rev Clifford M. Reed on "Dickens and Unitarianism".

Derek McAuley, Chief Officer

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

I have no doubt that in the long history of free-thinking Christianity and non-Trinitarianism, there have been many saintly and deeply religious people. Perhaps there still are.

Here in Australia, I have lived long enough to witness the transformation of the Melbourne Unitarian Church from theism to left-wing atheism. This process began when a minister appointed as assistant, the late Reverend Victor James, arrived from the U.K. in 1947. By 1949, he had outmanoeuvred the senior theistic minister and gained control of the church. Then the changes began, and have remained in place ever since, some being adopted by other Unitarian groups in Australia. As historian Dorothy Scott wrote of the Melbourne situation, ‘the church accepted Mr. James’ initiative in removing from the service the Lord’s Prayer, the benediction, and religious content generally. Hymns were replaced by ethical or humanist “songs of freedom”’.

Victor James, a keen supporter of the Communist Peace Movement of the Cold War days, gathered support, and remained minister of the church until his retirement in 1969. Referring to his own and his church’s attitude, he wrote in a pamphlet, ‘. . . we reject belief in the supernatural, in a life after death, in God, even though God may be defined as the supreme Intelligence, the Life Force or what-have-you.’

I could hardly be surprised when a member of the Liberal Catholic Church said later in my hearing, “Unitarianism is stupid”.

A rejection of things unseen is in stark contrast to the outlook of the Reverend Wyndham Heathcote (1861-1955) who ministered to all the Unitarian churches in Australia, including the church in Melbourne. In a sermon, Mr Heathcote said: “I am a convinced Spiritualist, not because I believe that consciousness survives death, but because I know it. I believe in God and immortality, I know survival of consciousness. I believe in God because such a belief is, to my mind, based on the most rational theory of the universe. It is a speculation better supported in reason than any other speculation about the Universe. It is a conclusion based, not on a certainty, but on what Bishop Butler called ‘the highest probability’. It involves difficulties, but not so many difficulties as any other theory.

“But with the survival of consciousness and with the doctrine of immortality, I do not believe merely because such a theory presents less difficulties than any other theory. I know by experience . . .”

Surely it cannot be hard for truly religious people to understand what is meant by spiritual freedom. As a collect in the Book of Common Prayer’s service for Morning Prayer expresses it, it is the service of God which is ‘perfect freedom’.

Blind Scottish hymn writer, the Reverend George Matheson, (1842-1906) author of the beautiful 'O Love that will not let me go' and 'Gather us in' (a favourite hymn, in its proper form, of the Reverend Wyndham Heathcote) also wrote wonderful lines explaining religious freedom:

'Make me captive. Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be.'

In my view, unless we are deeply religious enough to understand the real meaning of spiritual freedom, it is best that we never become involved in religious activities at all.

Ross Howard
(GA Lay Preacher and Guest Contributor)

VIEWPOINT SPECIAL EDITION FOR 2012

We are planning a second Viewpoint: Special Edition around the subject of
Creatures that Fly - To be illustrated by *Liz Foxbrook*.

We would love to have meditations, poems, stories, reminiscences
concerning butterflies and birds. [15 to 500 words please]

Please email to me: naomilinnell1939@btinternet.com
or by snailmail to: 4 Chandos Square, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10 1QW

MARK ALLABY

This is the last issue of our 'Newsletter' that Mark will edit as he resigned from the position as from the end of February 2012. He has been editor for seven years and has given us a N/L full of interest and sparkle which has appeared regularly with apparent smooth ease but which has had a great deal of work put into it. On behalf of the membership I would like to thank him for all this hard work.

While his right hand has been doing all this his left hand has also been busy. He collected poems that members had written plus some he wrote himself – for he is no mean poet – selected sixty and edited an anthology to mark our Diamond Anniversary. Then he turned some of his elegant cartouche drawings into correspondence cards and sold them for NUF funds. These were followed by cartouche bookmarks which were distributed in various ways for publicity.

Easy to see how very much we owe him. So I repeat – very many thanks indeed.

Dorothy Archer (President)

A MAJOR PROBLEM

Issue 398 (Nov-Dec 2011) of the Newsletter – as usual a fine issue produced by an excellent editor – contains references to several names which are memorable to me: above all, to Kuan-yin, the Buddhist goddess of compassion, to clergymen Arthur Long and Leslie Weatherhead. Arthur Long was my esteemed tutor and correspondent, and Methodist Leslie Weatherhead, a theological Modernist and practising psychotherapist, was the hero of my youth.

One of Arthur Long's published essays was entitled, 'Are God and Nature then at strife?', a quotation from Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. In his essay, Arthur Long ponders the problem of evil, and reminds us that the formidable Christian thinker, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, stated that, for him, there was no satisfactory explanation for the existence of evil, and that, in his view, the only thing for him to do was to do whatever he could to relieve suffering. Someone or Something urges us towards compassion and holiness, and as Arthur Long wrote the existence of good is a companion problem to the existence of evil. We are in the realm of mystery, and perhaps always will be.

In around 100-160 A.D., an early Christian called Marcion became deeply troubled by what he saw as a conflict between the idea of the punishing God of the Old Testament compared with the loving God portrayed in the New Testament. Not a lot is known about Marcion, for his writings have perished, but he seems to have been a most interesting person. Amongst other things, he prepared a canon of Scripture, rejecting the Old Testament, including only the Gospel of Luke, and omitting some of the epistles attributed to Paul, such as the epistles to Timothy and Titus. It is of note that in Timothy, we find words stressing the subordinate role of women. In the Pauline epistles Marcion retained, such



Marcion

as the amazing Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth and Rome, Paul clearly reveals his awareness of the widespread nature of suffering (see Romans 8.22) and of the need for compassion and for sexuality unmarred by unnatural practices and desires.

Though condemned by many, Marcion had his followers, who have become known as Marcionites, and who apparently gathered for worship until as late as the fifth century. One Christian scholar, Dr. Burkitt, has called them the first Dissenters.

For some of us, it is simply not possible to believe in an all-powerful, loving God. There are too many disasters, too much suffering; those of us who lived through the agonising years of World War II cannot forget.

But we need not despair. The evidence for life after physical death is considerable, and the two greatest religions – Buddhism and Christianity – have their gods, goddesses and saints who will always try to help us if they can. Mahayana Buddhism has its god Buddha and its goddess Kuan-yin, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity their god Jesus and their goddess Mary, all figures whom we can adore and who encourage us towards compassion and sexual purity. There is certainly no need to abandon religion when such great figures are available.

The more compassionate and mentally balanced people there are in the world, the better the world will be. A rational and devotional approach to religion can be an immeasurable help to the suffering world and its people.

Ross Howard (GA Lay Preacher and Guest Contributor)

A RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS ?

Andy Pakula, Unitarian Minister in London, recently displayed these words outside his chapel ‘A Church for atheists – and everyone else!’ Last month Alain de Botton (hereafter AdB) published ‘Religion for Atheists’ – evidence in itself which indicates that scientific reductionism of the kind maintained by Richard Dawkins et al. does not entirely hold the field among those who reject traditional theism.

AdB’s main argument is that the outward manifestations of religion – public worship, rites of passage – are meaningful even for those who do not accept the supernatural beliefs that may underlie them. They have an important function in fostering a spirit of community. He instances a carol service – which *breaks down economic and status subgroups...casting us in a wider sea of humanity. We are urged to overcome...our tendency to be judgmental and to make a sign of peace to whosoever chance has placed on either side of us.* (1)

In his book AdB develops this theme of community through his imaginary ‘agape restaurant’ where people would be invited to meet with others to eat together and discuss prescribed subjects, such as ‘how do we live with other people’, ‘how do we cope with our ambitions’ from a ‘Book of Agape’. Fanciful though this may seem to be, AdB has gone some way to realising it through his establishment of ‘The School of Life’ (2), which as well as providing regular classes addressed to the subject of the ‘good life’, has promoted a series of Sunday secular sermons, given by distinguished speakers on topics ranging from envy and political ethics to curiosity, compassion and humour which have attracted audiences of up to 500! He is strongly critical

of academic philosophy for having largely withdrawn from a consideration of what constitutes wisdom, questions which he states are more often considered by Oprah Winfrey although not always with the close attention they deserve.

The ‘teachings’ of his religion are to be found in works of high culture. If we wish to learn of the tensions that arise in marriage, he suggest we read ‘Anna Karenina’ and ‘Madame Bovary’; if we wish to know how to confront death, then study Seneca and Epicurus. AdB recognises that religion must involve contact with the numinous, non-rational domains of experience. *Religion is aware that we cannot be kept on a virtuous track simply through words.* He recounts that the impact on hearing the music of Bach as a young man was not just the music itself but because it spoke to him *in a tremulous voice about death.*

AdB’s ‘religion’ is a part of a strand of thought that goes back several centuries; its most obvious progenitor is to be found in the Religion of Humanity outlined by Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857), who initiated a church parallel in structure to the Roman Catholic church but shorn of what he regarded as its superstitious theological views, where Humanity (capital H!) would be the object of the faithfuls’ devotion. (A vestige of it still exists in Brazil) It was the precursor of many late 19th century ‘ethical churches’ and humanist societies.

Many Unitarians will find sympathy with his view that *those who hold no supernatural beliefs still require regular ritualised encounters with concepts such as friendship, gratitude and transcendence (1).* Bill Darlison has called for Unitarians to embrace a wider recognition of sacramental ritual in their worship and would endorse AdB’s view that *the wisdom of the faiths belong to all of mankind, even the most rational of us, and deserves to be selectively reabsorbed throughout the liturgical year.* This last sentence might be taken as a useful summary of the content of much current Unitarian worship.

Indeed the present state of Unitarianism could be taken as a commentary on the strengths and limitations of *Religion for Atheists.* That the ethical churches have all but disappeared and Unitarian chapels grow smaller in number may indicate that few non-believers share AdB’s desire for *regular ritualised encounters* of the kind he envisages, that many more would agree with Nietzsche that the ‘death of God’ should no longer require men and women to cravenly pretend that he is still alive. The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton has described AdB’s book as ‘banal’ and ‘an astonishingly impudent enterprise’. The author’s assertion that religion *teaches us to be polite, to honour one another and to be thoughtful and sober* he describes as *tediously neat and civilised and well mannered – a version of the Big Society.* This is not, as Eagleton trenchantly observes, *the gospel of a preacher who was tortured and executed for speaking up for justice ...who warned his comrades . . . they would meet the same fate . . . It is rather a*

soothing form of spiritual therapy. (3) That life would be better if we were all ‘nicer’ to each other is certainly true as is the realisation that mere exhortation to do so does not bring it about. As a significant part of the Unitarian movement has moved away from its liberal Christian roots, it has run the risk that Eagleton further observes in AdB’s book that *religious faith is reduced to a set of banal moral tags ... in the name of moral order, social consensus and aesthetic pleasure* and he would no doubt agree with St. Paul who put it thus *...in the last days shall come (those)...having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof ...ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.* (4) Faith, in the terms of Pascal’s wager, is what you are prepared to ‘bet your life on’; to have real significance it has to engage a person fully – heart, mind and soul. The call for a commitment to an authentic faith (with or without God) that requires sacrifice and probable opposition to what the ‘world’ offers is what I find lacking in AdB’s claim that *we need institutions that can ... harvest...precious ideas for us, remind us that we need them and present them in beautiful wrappings* (1) Unitarians may find much in de Botton’s ‘religion’ with which they can agree and from which they can learn but in my opinion they should beware of becoming an *institution ...in beautiful wrappings* whether these be historic buildings, past achievements or fine sounding words in worship. The need to discover a liberal religious identity that challenges and excites newcomers to join us continues.

Religion for Atheists by Alain de Botton (Hamish Hamilton)

(1) Alain de Botton *O Come all ye faithless* Guardian Weekend 24/12/11

(2) The School of Life www.schooloflife.com

(3) Terry Eagleton *Beyond Belief* Guardian Review 14/01/12

(4) 2 Timothy Chapter 3 verses 1,5 and 7

Ken Smith

A THEORY OF GENERAL ETHICS

This book is by Warwick Fox, described on the back cover as Reader in Ethics at the Centre for Professional Ethics at the University of Central Lancashire.

Historically, ethics has been confined to the domain of human action; how human beings should behave towards each other (and their relationship with God). The author wishes to go beyond this narrow concern and on to questions about how humans behave towards animals, towards Nature and the physical environment, besides having something to say about the structures and buildings which humans create. He is seeking to create a TOE (Theory of Everything) in the realm of ethics. This inclusion of concern about the environment was what greatly attracted me to this book in the first place.

Though the subject matter of this book is quite complex, the author explains his theory so precisely, so patiently, and in such a gentle manner and covers so many interesting issues, that his book borders on the beautiful.

Even so, at this stage (perhaps due to a failure on my part to grasp some of the author's arguments despite his best attempts at simplicity), I feel that the theory has some shortcomings despite its having received great praise from some of the author's peers.

The author believes that many systems of ethics concentrate too much on the individual and make too high or even unattainable demands. They see each human being as a unit, all units being equally worthy of love or help. But we can't love everybody! The author starts from a more practical position: the special love and obligations for family members, then the slightly lesser love and fewer obligations towards friends and, for all other people we have merely a desire not to deliberately harm them. We can't help everybody! To try to do so could hasten our own burn-out. The above way of looking at things comes as a consequence of the author's theory and has much in common with homespun wisdom. (I'm tempted to think that the reason the author must remind us that we can't love/help everybody is because the generality of us are inclined to try to do just that, to help one another. We are hard-wired that way – it's natural human empathy! – G.C.)

The author believes that his theory avoids many of the difficulties encountered by some animal welfare theorists. These people are opposed to cruelty to animals and to their slaughter. What is their line on cruelty inflicted by animals on other animals in the wild? Would they have all animals domesticated and fed on humanely slaughtered prey? Is vegetarianism a natural consequence of this reasoning? The author's theory avoids having to ask such questions, because it accepts and enfolds the cohesive structure of nature. The author opposes cruelty to animals but has no problem with killing animals for food, therefore, he need offer no opinion on vegetarianism since that is a question which must be resolved on other grounds. His theory, [because it does not see animals as individual units (a case of failing to see the wood for the trees!) can incorporate the abstract entity of the 'species' as an object of ethical concern], thus upholds the safeguarding of endangered species.

There is a most interesting discussion on language. We tend to think that spoken language is an innate ability which humans possess, distinguishing us from animals, but there is more to it than that! Without other people around us we would NEVER acquire language! This is borne out by those rare cases of children abandoned and brought up by animals (usually by wolves), or being born deaf. In cases where language is then late acquired, that first moment when the connection between a symbol and an object is achieved is a truly emotional Eureka moment.

The author's theory, which he calls the theory of Responsive Cohesion, can briefly be described by an example of it, in regard to conversations. One kind of conversation repeats things said many times

before and brings out nothing new. A second kind is of genuine give and take, lively and productive as ideas are exchanged and developed. A third type is one where two people are talking but not really listening to each other. It is the second kind of conversation which is most illustrative of the best outcome, the most cohesive and yet most alive. A delightful account of the word 'conversation' is given using its Latin roots which mean 'keeping company with each other through constant turnings'.

Similarly, the present situation of the physical universe represents the best outcome from millennia of interactions of physical objects, jostling against each other, building up and breaking down. With living things, evolution is much the same process. All this just happened – there was no intention (God?) behind it, in the author's view. The universe thus takes the form of a cohesive whole which functions well but which is fluid and subject to change. The theory of Responsive Cohesion thus reflects the basic pattern of what goes on in the natural world.

The author applies his theory to many issues: politics, abortion, euthanasia, buildings, etc. What he doesn't seem to give an opinion on is the morally unjustifiable division of the world into the extremely rich at one end of the scale, and the extremely poor at the other. His theory would no doubt point to a more equitable world as being the best and most cohesive outcome, but I don't see how it could be used to achieve this goal. Thus, to me, the theory seems more descriptive than prescriptive.

Regrettably, this brief review cannot really capture the flavour of the book. Published 2006 by the MIT Press 978-0-262-56219-5

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FOREGOING

The many issues discussed above have set my mind off onto some independent lines of thought, as follows:

In the past, the Church's interpretation of the Bible was that the sun went round the earth. Those who taught that the earth went round the sun were in dire peril, and one such, Bruno, after a 7-year trial, was burned at the stake as an heretic. The scientific view has now been vindicated over that of the Bible. We seem to be moving, step by step, away from over-reliance on the Bible. Take the following three issues:

Slavery is never explicitly condemned in the Bible. An entry in 'A Rationalist Encyclopaedia' by Joseph McCabe, states that The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel employed slaves on its estates in the West Indies. The American churches, Anglican, Methodist and Baptist, owned 600,000 slaves. This encyclopaedia quotes J. Macy as writing that the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian authorities expelled any minister who advocated abolition. Today, slavery is abolished. I don't think there is anything in the

Bible explicitly condemning cruelty to animals. Today, cruelty to animals is no longer tolerated.

On homosexuality, the mainstream churches see the Bible's attitude as being one of outright condemnation. Today there is a more understanding attitude developing.

From these three issues, it is obvious that we have been able to develop a higher morality without any aid from the Bible. We have to some degree 'outgrown' the Bible. We should perhaps lighten up with regard to this venerable book, recognising that it comes from another age, and that perhaps the most important and relevant teaching comes from the New Testament and from the teachings of Jesus exhorting us to love one another.

To see the Bible in this more objective light does nothing to undermine a belief in God for those who have such a belief but it may do a lot for those Christians who come to realise that they have a homosexual nature and who are struggling to reconcile that nature with an outmoded interpretation of the Bible. This can be a real struggle leading in some cases to breakdown or suicide. In the latter case it seems the needless waste of an often young life, and a terrible tragedy for that person's family.

George Cope

THE NEW EUGENICS – THE SHADOW REMAINS

What constitutes eugenics is a matter of some debate. At dictionary.com it is defined thus: the study of or belief in the possibility of improving the qualities of the human species or a human population, especially by such means as discouraging reproduction by persons having genetic defects or presumed to have inheritable undesirable traits (**negative eugenics**) or encouraging reproduction by persons presumed to have inheritable desirable traits (**positive eugenics**).

The defeat of the nations which perpetrated the worst abuses on mankind in the name of eugenics casts a very long shadow. After the end of World War 2 eugenics became deeply unfashionable and those who supported it in the first half of the 20th Century went very quiet. The actions of Germany are so well known as not to need reiteration. It is less well known how much support eugenics enjoyed outside Germany before the war and who the prominent people were involved in it. The list is frankly embarrassing and includes many who otherwise enjoy outstanding reputations: George Bernard Shaw, John Maynard Keynes, John Harvey Kellogg, H.G. Wells, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and perhaps more predictably Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes. This is to name but a few.

Sterilisation was practised on 'undesirables' and 'mental defectives' in many European Countries as well as the United States, Canada and Japan. The figures are significant although dwarfed by the German atrocities. The

United States and Sweden sterilised roughly equal numbers and it is clearly worth drawing attention to the difference in population of these two countries. The combined number of sterilisations they carried out is over 120,000. In fact the practice did not end in the United States until the 1960s and in Sweden until 1975. Sterilisation did not catch on in the United Kingdom and never received legal recognition although some clinicians quietly carried out the operations on some mental patients. Other forms of eugenic practice took place in other countries including Australia and Brazil. These mainly involved segregation and control of marriage. The association of eugenics and racism is well known and racist eugenic programmes were enacted in countries besides Germany, for instance Korea, Australia and Brazil but these were more to do with segregation and the control of marriage. There were other eugenic genocides at various times, notably in German colonies in Africa. All these practical eugenic programmes went alongside a great deal of research, which we now know was largely flawed.

The segregation of mental patients into institutions was very widespread around the world, particularly in the 20th Century and one of its primary purposes was eugenic; to stop such 'undesirables' procreating. Clearly eugenic practises of one sort or another did not end with the defeat of Germany and though the worst abuses may have been stamped out in the developed world (excepting what happened during the break up of Yugoslavia), significant interest in the idea of eugenics has not.

Indeed there is something of a quiet regeneration in eugenics, albeit on the surface lacking many of the inhuman qualities of older practises with any racism very much taking a back seat. More worrying is that it is backed up by much more robust science which gives it potentially more power than before. The cutting edge of this is in IVF, or test tube babies. Genetic profiling and selection of embryos is providing the potential for parents to make wide-ranging choices about the characteristics of their offspring. In the United States companies are performing these procedures and offering opportunities for avoiding a wide range of defects as well as inheritable diseases. However, they are currently shying away from selection of embryos for enhancements such as high intelligence or cosmetic reasons such as eye, hair or skin colour.

The possibility of altering the genetic makeup of newly fertilised embryos is now theoretically possible using gene therapy techniques. This perhaps removes some of the ethical concerns about selection of embryos, especially the now commonplace selective abortions. But it raises other questions because the power to alter an embryo makes possible more far-reaching changes to the human population than mere selection.

That 'voluntary' selection (i.e. the choice to terminate or select an embryo for implantation is made by the parent/s) is eugenics is denied by

some medical professionals but if the first part of the above definition of eugenics is assumed I find it hard to accept this. To me it is a simple question: is this about improving the qualities of a human population or not? The rights and wrongs of all this are a separate question to which I shall now turn.

One of the most common objections to eugenics is based on the religious principle of the sanctity of human life. There are those that support eugenics who casually dismiss this dearly held belief: for instance this, from a respondent (name unknown) on an academic website, to one of the articles which has informed this writing:

“Eugenics has massive potential for the betterment of mankind via eradication of disease, refinement of ability and healthy productive longevity.....we need to disregard religious dogma and agendas, ignore naysayers, media demonization, and plan for our future.” (Posted in 2010) The misspelling of the word ‘religious’ was apparently by the author of these comments.

The consequence of going against the principle of sanctity is to undermine the value we place on each other, by making others expendable. The bullies then have a mandate to vilify the weakest members of society and the wrong sort of people gain precedence. This is set against the desirability of the eradication of disease but the biggest problem I have with eugenics is that the end is used to justify the means. Few nowadays would dispute the value of the 200 year programme of inoculations which eradicated smallpox and began with one Dr Jenner in the 18th Century in England. There are some inheritable conditions of such gravity that few could support their perpetuation positively. But people with such conditions are just as much people as anybody else and discarding them after conception is to me immoral. Correction of a faulty gene in an embryo would be preferable to excluding and discarding it.

Even if you subscribe to a limited form of eugenics to eradicate certain conditions, a whole new area of possibilities is opening up to alter human characteristics which raise other ethical problems. A film called ‘Gattacca’ is much cited in recent writings about eugenics. The scenario is a society where part of the population has been genetically ‘maximised’ (genetically engineered to remove negative characteristics and optimise positive ones) and the other part has not. Tensions develop between them. One theme in the film involves a non-maximised individual who outperforms all his maximised contemporaries but is deemed incapable of space flight because of the *possibility* of his getting heart disease.

The whole area of research into genes which confer both restrictive and enhanced characteristics is in its infancy. Some clear cut examples are already known such as the association of sickle cell disease and immunity from malaria, both mediated by the same gene. This area gives rise to an important argument against restricting genetic diversity.

Equally important is the breakdown of solidarity in society that results from destroying those deemed unfit. Making the lives of the 'ubermenschen' easy does not necessarily lead to fulfilment. Removing the need for compassion dehumanises us. Perhaps if a paradise were to be created by entirely ethical means and everybody was maximised by gene therapy, including those born naturally. . . I do not know where that would lead but if it is part of human nature to rise to challenges then that would have to be edited out along with the debilitating traits.

I believe there are major objections to trying to create utopias of any sort. I believe striving and fulfilment is integral to life on earth and absolute bliss belongs to another life.

Chris Barchard

(Chris Barchard was a member of the Working Party for the Nuffield Council on Bioethics 1998 report, 'Mental disorders and Genetics: the ethical context.')

WHAT IS YOUR RELIGION?

What is your religion is a question I have been often asked. Most recently during a recent short stay in hospital where upon being asked I explained what Unitarianism is. After saying Unitarianism had Christian roots the nurse said I will write down krist. I was in a Thai hospital and the Thai word krist means Christian. Actually there are two Thai words kristian means Protestant and kristang means Catholic.

Only a small number of Thais are Christian. Missionary efforts have met with little success in Thailand. As one Thai king said we have a perfectly good religion why do we need a new one?

I usually go to great pains to explain that Unitarianism isn't exactly the same as Christianity, after all we don't believe Jesus was God but since I was in hospital I didn't feel like making the effort.

The question is asked on a work permit application form when people are sometimes told not to write anything obscure as the Thais won't understand it.

I once had a temporary ID card issued by my then employer, the Royal Thai Navy on which the word Unitarian was proudly written in the Thai script. My colleague wanted the section left blank on his card as he had no religious beliefs. The clerk had difficulty with this as he like many Thais found it inconceivable that someone could have no religion.

I used to have little difficulty in explaining what Unitarian meant when asked what my religion was by my students as they would look the word up in their Thai-English dictionaries and there the word would be.

The more recent Thai-English print dictionaries have dropped the word. Is that telling us something?

Ian Martin

From the NUF BOOK COLLECTION

Being the 400th edition of the *Newsletter* it seems appropriate to be reviewing two small books by Rev Leslie J. Belton, the first President of the NUF and the writer of the first item in the first edition of the *NUF Newsletter*. In 1931 The Lindsey Press published his ***Psychical Research and Religion***. Although much has happened in this field, since that time, many of the same questions are asked. “Is it reasonable to believe some of the extraordinary experiences reported to have happened in clairvoyance, out of body experiences, telepathy etc.?” Throughout he uses the term, ‘supernormal’, to emphasise that just because we don’t understand these things within the remit of the five senses and the natural world, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they aren’t real. Whilst accepting that many fall within the fraudulent and hallucinatory his conclusion is that after examining the many reports made by reasonable men or witnessing some himself, it is unreasonable not to be open to what is a real experience – he calls this dismissal of experience unreasonable scepticism. He would be pleased to have seen the work of Alistair Hardy, who set up the *Religious Experience Society* at Oxford in 1969 and to know that the *Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies* established in 1965 is still going strong. Website: www.ukunitariansocieties.org.uk/psychical/. I do wonder what Leslie Belton would have made of the marvels of magic practised today?

The second book published, again by The Lindsey Press, in 1941 is: ***Can We Still Believe in Man?*** Just because it is a short booklet of only fifty pages, it would be wrong to dismiss it as thin on quality. Belton examines the difference between immanence and transcendence, the God of the mystics, unity and wholeness, in contrast to the authoritarian tradition that preaches fear of God, alienation and Original Sin. He prophesies on the danger of babies being born ‘with spanners in their mouths’ - systems rather than being nurtured as a person, humanly and spiritually. I suppose he would now have used the word ‘mobile’ instead of ‘spanner’. Progress and evolution is examined not in terms of nineteenth century industrialisation but in the growth of self-consciousness and morality, the spiritual heart of co-creative, unconscious evolution. He concludes hopefully and optimistically, which could be considered courageous considering the time at which he was writing. We are given an excellent examination of individualism and collectivism with a conclusion that draws all the previous threads together. Both are shown to fall short as he leads us to a new way of living together that is as important today as it was in 1941. I do hope that there will be many requests to be added to a circulation list as it is in the NUF Book Collection.

Joan Wilkinson

ELECTION PROFILES

Each candidate for election to the NUF Committee is required to provide a profile of not more than 250 words.

Naomi Linnell

I was baptised a Roman Catholic but was brought up as a high church Anglican - and as a Tory. Regularly accused by a future cabinet minister of being a Conservative with a Christian Socialist conscience, who also indulged in some pretty dodgy theology, I emerged decades later as a liberal Liberal and an Unitarian who tries her poor best to follow the teachings and example of that extraordinary man Jesus. Home now at last, I am very willing, with whatever I may have to offer, to serve the Fellowship where I have found that very precious spiritual home.

Howard Wilkins

I am standing as a candidate for election to the National Unitarian Fellowship committee as I believe in the NUF as an organisation that actively promotes Unitarian values worldwide. The wide range of member opinions and geographical locations ensures that the NUF more accurately reflects the Unitarian faith community than any other organisation or community I know. It is for these reasons that I wish to stand for election to the committee and help to make the NUF flourish.

I have been an NUF member for over twelve years and Membership Secretary for most of this time, which gives me a good insight into the spread and diversity of our members. I am a member of three Unitarian congregations excluding the NUF and I also am a member of various other organisations including the Unitarian Renewal Group and the Buildings Advisory Panel.

Outside Unitarianism I am secretary of two Heritage organisations and I am a local parish councillor where I serve on various committees.

Peter Zone

My name is Peter Zoné, a 51 year old man, married with 3 sons, living in a small village outside the university town of Uppsala, Sweden. I have worked in the transport sector in administrative positions, all my life. I also have several years of University studies, with a variety of subjects ranging from quality and environmental management to marine biology and maritime law 'in my rucksack.'

I am very interested in natural science and environmental questions, also in the development of the society we live in. Having been interested in religious and spiritual matters all my life, I stumbled into the Unitarian movement via the internet some years ago and have attended the enjoyable NUF weekends at Hucklow for the past 5 years.

I feel that Unitarians are an unique mix of people, not easy to find anywhere else, who on one hand, have a deep respect and appreciation for nature and also a great interest in social and spiritual issues. I have previously shared some ideas and

experiences via articles in various Unitarian newsletters and postings on the Forum, and I look forward to continuing to contribute in whatever way I can to developing the Unitarian movement.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Lord Louis Mountbatten came back to his old friend Barbara Cartland briefly, in a dream, the other night.

“There hasn’t been enough time since he died for more than a fleeting visit,” says the world’s top-selling novelist, who reveals that death does not cut her off from her friends and family.

Barbara Cartland was born in 1901. “I believe that there is no such thing as being dead,” she says. “All my life I have relied on help from friends who have passed on to get me out of tight spots.

“There is my brother Ronald, whom I adored and who was the first MP to be killed in the war. He was only 38. I was desperately upset about it and I went to every clairvoyant in London in an effort to get through to him. But they were all useless, so I decided that I had to do it myself. It worked!

“If I want something, I say ‘help me, help me’ . . . and I’ve always been helped. It is almost like praying.

“Then there was my husband, with whom I had more than two decades of wonderful marriage, who didn’t believe in the hereafter.

“After his death 21 years ago I had a message which told me he had been mistaken. A week after the funeral, my maid who had been with me for more than 25 years said: ‘Have you noticed the wonderful smell of carnations outside McCorquodall’s dressing-room?’

“The next morning I noticed it myself. The smell was overpowering although there are no flowers in the house.

“It was unlike that of any carnations I have ever smelt in England. It was the exotic fragrance of malmaisons which I hadn’t known for years. It came and went for three weeks.

“Then I realised what it was. Every year Hugh and I would go to Paris for a second honeymoon and he would buy me a huge bunch of carnations before we went into church to say a prayer for our marriage.

“The smell could mean only one thing. Hugh was trying to tell me that he had been wrong.”

First published in ‘New Idea’ (Australia) 17 March 1984

Contributed by *Ross Howard*

WEB NEWS

The online blog of our Minister, Tony McNeile, may be found at:-

<http://tonymcneile.blogspot.com/>

The blog of NUF member, Rev.Gillian Peele, may be found at

<http://revgill.blogspot.com/>

NUF committee member, Louise Rogers, maintains a blog 'Developing Spiritual Community' at <http://dev-spiritual-community.blogspot.com/>

DIARY DATES

11th - 13th May

Meditational Fellowship Weekend

Ivy House, Warminster. For details contact: Brenda Knopf

Tel. 02380 555333

Sat 26th May

Dr Williams's Library Centre for Dissenting Studies, London

A one-day conference will be held on Saturday 26 May on '1662 Revisited' to mark the 350th anniversary of the Restoration Settlement of Religion. Further details at:-

<http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/events/c2012.html>

Sat 9th Jun

350th Anniversary of the Great Ejection, London

Further details at :- <http://www.dwlib.co.uk/dwlib>

CORRECTION AND APOLOGY

Editorial apologies for the wrong information on the cover of the last Newsletter which should, of course, have said: Issue 399 Jan/Feb 2012.

NEXT ISSUE

The deadline for the next issue is Monday 16th April 2012. Contributions on any theme and responses to any item in the newsletter are always welcome. All contributions are acknowledged.

The views expressed in the newsletter are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the NUF or of the wider Unitarian movement. All contributors are members of the NUF except where otherwise indicated.