

# 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

Thoughts turn to Easter and the following week when the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches meets at the Jubilee campus of the University of Nottingham. This is close to me so I will be a day visitor. The GA annual meetings take place from Thursday 8th to Sunday 11th April. Rev. Tony McNeile will be the NUF delegate this year.

On the Saturday, the NUF AGM will be held at 10.45 am. I look forward to meeting NUF members there. If there is anything members would like included in 'any other business', please send it to me by Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> March for inclusion on the agenda.

The AGM is followed by the NUF's 'On the Spot' session led by Tony McNeile. The guests are Derek McAuley (GA Chief Officer) and Rev Alex Bradley (Principal Unitarian College) with questions and discussion on the theme 'Where are you taking us?' If you would like a question posed please send it to Tony.

At Nottingham we will have a NUF stand to be manned during the coffee/tea breaks and at lunchtime. John and Joan Wilkinson are having a well deserved rest this year so please let me know if you can help man/woman the stand during one of the intervals to answer queries, hand out information and take new member applications.

There are two nominations for the two vacant positions on the NUF Executive Committee. An election will, therefore, not be necessary. After the required year since her last committee membership, Joan Wilkinson is returning as an ordinary member proposed by Elizabeth Barlow and seconded by Mel Prideaux. Louise Rogers has been proposed by Joan Wilkinson and seconded by Pat Caddick. Welcome both.

As you will have seen if your membership renewal has fallen due recently, there has been a modest increase of 50p in the annual subscription. I omitted from the renewal form mention that donations are also accepted. Anyone wanting to donate can do so by sending a cheque to our treasurer, Elizabeth Barlow, payable to the NUF.

A date for your diary is the NUF Weekend at Hucklow. This year it takes place on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> - Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> November. The theme is 'Asking the Big Question: Where is our place on the Spiritual Spectrum?' A booking form will go out with the next Newsletter.

The contact details for Tony, Elizabeth and I, in relation to points mentioned above, are on the back of the Newsletter. Feel free to contact me at any time with your suggestions or concerns.

*John Greenwood*

*Cover picture: 'Church on a hill' by Liz Egebäck Foxbrook (See page 4)*

## THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE ONE-NESS

It is some years now since a rather nervous young woman stepped up to the reception desk at a library in a nearby town and asked for information as to how she might start making enquiries about her forbears and possible relatives who might still be living in the town. A passing librarian with an armful of books overheard her as she passed by and advised her that her best plan was to win the lottery 'and then all her relations would come running'.

Fast forward a decade and in that decade the ownership and use of computers became widespread. One of the many consequences of this being that genealogy was no longer the hobby for those who had time and money to devote to it but had become a hobby that many people had taken up with enthusiasm.

To-day if that same woman asked the same question in the same place she would be directed to a designated computer desk where she would find a volunteer from the local genealogical society waiting to show her electoral rolls, lists of emigrants on steamships, army records and hundreds of other lists which could appear at the click of a mouse.

Looking at rough sketches of family trees it always amazes me how quickly the top branch races sideways. Obviously we have two parents, four grand parents, but the numbers still take my breath away.

Our English population has grown from 1 million as recorded in the Domesday Book a thousand years ago to well over 50 million to-day.

Prof. Steve Jones of University College London writes 'Trace ones lineage back far enough and it will inevitably coalesce with all others. Soon they will all be part of the universal lineage that links all humanity. Even a short journey upstream is almost guaranteed to unearth a magnificent ancestor . . . More or less everybody in the Western world would be descended from the Emperor Nero, rather fewer from William the Conqueror and only a few hundred thousand from George Washington.' How closely are we physically related.

Last August David Skelton wrote a letter to the 'Inquirer' saying that Unitarians often defined themselves in a negative way by saying which bits of scripture or theology they disagreed with. He suggested that, punning apart, we define ourselves in a positive way stressing our one-ness. We all tend to believe in one god, or creator or holy spirit - name unimportant - the human race is one and we live on one planet. Unity and therefore peace is our objective.

*Dorothy Archer*

P.S. When you do finally get around to drawing up your family tree I do hope that you don't discover that your gt.-gt.-gt.-gt. Uncle George was a horse thief. You probably will. Worse still you may find that he was also my relative too!

## THE MINISTER'S MUSINGS

They say the art of letter writing is dying, giving way to the forty character electronic messages of twitter between mobile phones. Letter writing is not dying in the NUF. Letter writing is the basis of our Books of Fellowship where a group of up to six people each write a letter to the group and comment on the ones they have received. It takes a couple of months for the process to complete and if it stalls there will be a friendly phone call from the organiser Alan Oates to ask where our 'Book' might be stuck. Alan also writes in the Book I belong to. This time we were writing down our thoughts about our concepts of God, religion and spirituality amongst other things.

Alan quoted to us that God is not an objective being but a subjective one. According to Don Cupitt, 'God is the mythological embodiment of our values'. Alan differentiated between spirituality and religion by saying that spirituality is about individual growth and development whereas religion is more a social phenomenon - and when religion is associated with an earthly power, it flourishes. Food for thought!

Our letters cover many subjects - we have discussed spiritualism, orbs, snow-bound living, grandchildren, famous women, experiences of church life and more. One thought can carry us in many directions.

My brother-in-law has collected his family letters that cover three generations and has published them for the family. How interesting to read them - they are a history of war time, floods in Holland, family adventures and family troubles. I sensed that writing a letter to a relative or friend, not only kept them in touch but was a way of sharing thoughts and experiences. Sometimes it was a means of catharsis.

It is sad, I feel, that letter writing is becoming something of a lost art. Thoughts expressed in a person's own hand on a piece of paper that you can hold and study over and over again are a warm and personal means of communication. I feel rather pleased that we in the NUF retain our letter writing skills through the Books of Fellowship. So 'Thank You' Alan for keeping the words flowing between us and for your contribution to them.

*Tony McNeile*

## REFLECTIONS

### CHALK-PIT HILL

*Each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows  
Strike heaven on the face, . . .*

*Shakespeare: Macbeth*

As the four children pushed close up to the old wall, seven year old George felt the rough edges of the top railings rusty against his face and smelled the bittersweet odour of rotting vegetation where the flowers on the bank had succumbed to the heat of summer and the siling rains of last week's storms. Silently he watched the group of children playing on the dusty lawn in front of the house. Boys in grey shirts and long shorts were kicking around an old rubber ball and three girls with pinafores over faded cotton dresses bent over a set of Five Stones, their hair - tawny, long blond and brown - mimicking the coat of the fat tabby cat sunning himself on the doorstep. These were the War Orphans, newly moved into the big empty house next door to the ugly red brick Church at the top of Chalk-pit Hill, and the four local children staring through the railings were fascinated by them.

All the children had been told they must be nice to the orphans whose fathers had been killed in the fighting. A few had lost their mothers as well, in homes blitzed flat like careless beetles under the angry boots of George's dad. But when next day they saw the alien group standing together in the corner of the playground, motionless and mute songbirds caged in a foreign land, isolated in their difference, suddenly hostile, George and his friends turned away, back to their own exclusive games. The Orphans, they felt, already got too much attention and fuss made of them.

Sixty years later, sitting on a lounge in the sun-bathed garden, George wondered if Kate remembered the old orphanage. When the West Indian immigrants arrived and moved into the long tumbledown terrace in Albert Road, the orphans as a distinctive group disappeared and the playground hierarchies changed. Dark skinned, with voices rich and smooth as melting chocolate, laughing and singing in that strange patois of theirs, these latest incomers became the new strangers. 'We didn't play with them either,' thought George. 'The kids were the same with the Ugandan Asians, and when our Jenny announced she was going to marry Rajiv, I was afraid that we would lose her to strangers.' He sighed.

"Oh, meant to tell you," he said to his wife, "I saw off that BNP candidate. Told him what to do with his evil fascist ideas. And, by the way, I don't like the grandkids' Polish Plumber jokes. Their dad was an immigrant too." She laughed. "Be patient," she said, "they'll learn, like most of us did. Remember Neville and Joan who adopted me. They were a lovely Mum and Dad and they welcomed everyone wherever they came from, however different or poor they were." She laughed again. "Even you George." "Yes," he agreed, "they were good people. God bless them and everyone like them. They were especially kind when the penniless soldier boy from next door asked to marry their beautiful daughter. And she was the little girl with long blonde hair whom once I'd stared at through the railings, and whom I married in the ugly brick church on Chalk-Pit Hill."

*Naomi Linnell*

## MY EUROPEAN SOJOURN Part 3

To the east of Dresden is the border with Germany's eastern neighbour. Poland is a country which suffered more than most during WWII and its aftermath. This was my next destination. If you recall, it was Germany's invasion of Poland that triggered Britain's declaration of war on Germany in September 1939. Many Poles fled their country and joined up with the Free Polish forces serving with distinction in the air force and the army. The Polish contingent fought with particular valour in Normandy in the summer of 1944. They were instrumental in the closing of the Falaise gap which resulted in the encircling and capture of German forces, preventing their attempted escape eastwards. Although the Poles contributed hugely to the victory, they were deprived of the fruits of that victory as their homeland was occupied by the Soviets and subjected to another half century of domination by a foreign power. It was, however, the Poles who were instrumental in the collapse of communism in the eastern bloc. Peaceful protests by ship workers in Gdansk on the Baltic coast snowballed in Poland and led to the formation of Solidarity seeking freedoms and improved conditions. Their example was echoed in other eastern European countries and in Russia itself where glasnost and perestroika led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When I stood in the square in Krakow in Spring 2009, I was awed by both the mediaeval architecture and the vibrancy of the scene. There was a sense of liberation, freedom and joy which I shared. I was mindful that the Polish Brethren in nearby Racow (pronounced Racov) declared the Racovian catechism which was a stepping stone to the attaining of religious freedom that Unitarians enjoy today. Sadly, the Polish Brethren were suppressed and persecuted for their liberal, anti-trinitarian beliefs but their legacy remains.



How fortunate we are to be able to draw on their inspiration as we seek to address the spiritual challenges of life in the third millennium. It is through an appreciation of the trials and tribulations of our predecessors that we can cherish our good fortune in enjoying religious freedom whilst we seek to perpetuate their efforts to further human understanding and tolerance.

One section of society that, perhaps ironically, is struggling to adapt to the newly won freedoms enjoyed in Poland is the Roman Catholic Church. The late Pope John Paul hailed from Krakow where he was a bishop and was a major influence for change, supporting the economic liberalisation that Solidarity successfully sought. The Roman Catholic Church during Soviet times was a great source of

comfort to Polish citizens with church attendance disapproved of by the authorities as a form of passive disobedience. When I was in the main square admiring the cathedral in the corner, I was struck by the (to me) anachronistic sight of five young priests emerging in monk style habits. They appeared as though from another era. I read subsequently that the Roman Catholic Church is suffering a priest recruitment crisis in Poland as few young men are willing to declare celibacy in order to take the cloth. Nor are they willing to 'live in sin' as they might have hypocritically done in former days. Women, of course, are not permitted to become priests. So the Roman Catholic Church is faced with reconciling its traditions with the pressure for it to liberalise. If it were to do so, would its adherents lose faith? If not, does it risk decline and marginalisation? It's quite a dilemma. During communist times the Roman Catholic faith was an agent of economic and political freedom. Now it is under threat through the seeking for religious freedom. The Roman Catholic Church cannot rely, as it has in the past, on obedience. It will have to come to terms with democracy. For those who feel left in a spiritual vacuum, one hopes that the free liberal Christian journey that Unitarianism has taken will offer a precedent to show that there are alternatives to a loss of faith altogether. At least, unlike the Polish Brethren, those that feel that they have to leave the Roman Catholic Church won't have to leave the country.

From Krakow, I went about 45 miles to the west to the Polish town of Oswiecim like Dresden a point where a number of railway lines intersect. It was for this reason that it was established as a location for factories by German companies using forced labour to supply the German war machine. It is better known by its German name of Auschwitz, initially for the concentration camp and then for Auschwitz Birkenau (the extermination camp) which had a spur from those railway lines. Although we now know what went on there, it is still shocking to actually see it. I won't describe it in detail. However, what I would say is that I cannot understand how holocaust deniers can maintain that it never happened. In my earlier article on Theresienstadt, I have already described what occurred. **Auschwitz was the application of economies of scale for the achievement of the intended final solution.** 6 million was the death toll across all the concentration and death camps. We know this because of the scrupulous record keeping that was undertaken as a part of the process. That this inhumanity could be perpetrated defies all understanding. One hopes that this will never be repeated. I will leave it at that.

*John Greenwood*

## **UNITARIAN WOMEN WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE Part 3 Mary Hays 1759-1843**

Mary Hays is the last of the women in this first group and often the least celebrated by Unitarians today. This is to our detriment as in this figure we can see

a fine intellect, someone who was determined to find ways to become educated and to pass that knowledge on to other women in as accessible form possible.

She was born into a Baptist family, losing her father when she was only young. A double loss came when she fell in love with another Baptist, John Eccles, overcoming parental opposition only to lose him when she was twenty-one. She was stricken with grief. After recovering a little from this she vowed to turn her mind to educating herself but this was no easy matter. On hearing the visiting Robert Robertson preach she initiated an introduction and for the next eight years, until his death, he became her mentor. Exchanges were all done by correspondence and this was a pattern that she would turn to throughout her life. Robert Robertson was a Baptist having much in common with the rational dissenters and being welcome in Unitarian pulpits. We should remember the fluidity of rational dissent at this time with Unitarianism becoming more clearly defined as a denomination at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Robertson died whilst on a preaching trip in Birmingham and Joseph Priestley presided at his funeral held at New Meeting Chapel. In his sermon Priestley praised him for educating his daughters equally with his sons, saying that: "the minds of women are capable of the same improvement and the same furniture as that of men". What we see demonstrated throughout Mary Hays's life is the part that Unitarian men played in her education but also the part they played in bringing the subject of gender and education into their reformist agenda. Robert Robertson had introduced Mary Hays to theology, philosophy and history. She became what was possibly the first feminist theologian in interpreting the Bible from a feminist perspective, wanting to learn how gender and religion informed each other and how it then informed her own life.

Losing her mentor was a great blow to Hays but on hearing that Joseph Priestley had moved to the pioneering Dissenting New College, Hackney, in 1791, she found a way of becoming introduced to Priestley. An old student of Robert Robertson acted as a go-between so that Hays could read Priestley's lectures, listen to the sermons at the college and meet and talk with the tutors and their wives. It is at this time Hays decides that she is in fact a Unitarian. For the next three years Priestley was the biggest influence in her life as she extended her academic learning, which now addressed science, theology, history and geography. Before *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published, Hays was already writing her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on*

*Behalf of Women* but didn't publish this until six years later in 1798. The first publication that drew attention to her was written in response to Gilbert Wakefield's attack on the religious rituals of "the Dissenters of our time." Hays as "Eusabia" enters the debate pointing out that it is through the pulpit that congregations and especially women can hear religious addresses that are biblically, socially and politically informed. She is complimented by men such as Theophilus Lindsey and the tutors of

New College, Hackney, which at this time was considered a centre of radicalism by the establishment. By this time Hays was part of the Unitarian network, writing sermons that were preached at Essex Chapel by Dr John Disney, Assistant Minister at Essex Street Chapel.

In 1793 Hays, along with her sister, published *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*. Instead of the more usual conduct books of the time Hays outlines a system of learning for young women along the lines advocated and instituted by Joseph Priestley and others at New College. Whilst male Rational Dissenters addressed the lack of education for girls and young women agreeing that it was right that they should be educated, nevertheless the end goal was to help them become educated mothers and wives who could converse on the same level as their husbands. Education for young women at that time was carried out by ministers and teachers to visiting relatives and good women through the network of family relationships. Few recognised the radicalism which Hays was beginning to advocate. She knew from bitter experience how difficult it was for many middle-class women, not part of the network of rational dissent, to access higher education.

Tutor, William Frend, had been but one who had responded to Hays's defence of dissenting worship and as Priestley left New College, appropriately fitted into the vacated space in her life as mentor. However, she sadly misread the messages he sent out and became romantically attracted to him and her letters to him made open avowals of that love only to be rejected. Following the publication of *Letter and Essays*, Hays moved out of the maternal home and took rooms closer to William Frend and also William Godwin, the leading radical political philosopher, to whom she had written requesting a copy of his new book, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. It is in William Godwin she confides and who suggests she uses her letters to Frend as a basis for a novel. In 1796 *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is published and is immediately attacked by conservative critics. This wasn't a time to be writing radical literature of any sort but yet in 1798 Hays publishes *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, anonymously this time. It can be no coincidence that it had been during the previous few years that Hays and Wollstonecraft had become close friends until the latter died in 1797, confiding in each other about their failed relationships. It is Hays who re-introduces Wollstonecraft to William Godwin following an unsuccessful encounter some years before. When Godwin had wanted to talk to Tom Paine over dinner at publisher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft had imposed herself on the conversation. It was Hays who later helped to nurse her friend through childbirth, who some days later lost her fight for life.

The next decade witnessed Hays's solid contribution to historical writing grounded in research. In 1803 *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries*, is published in six volumes. This was written "for the benefit of my own sex. For their improvement, and to their entertainment...they require pleasure to be mingled with instruction... I have at heart the happiness of my sex, and their advancement in the grand scale of rational and social existence." (Preface) Priestley, amongst other Unitarians, was known to welcome

this work. It ran to several editions and was read throughout the nineteenth century. The women included were meant as role models for what women could achieve.

Once more she turned to Unitarian men who could forward her historical research and began corresponding with William Tooke the Younger and Elder, the latter being a recognised historian with an extensive library. She began writing for the growing, lucrative children's market publishing *Historical Dialogues for Young Persons* 1806-8.

Moving around at this time to be nearer to her family, she became a subscriber and attendant at the Unitarian Chapel in Bristol where Dr Estlin was minister and with whom "she was well pleased". To the end of her life she was part of the Unitarian network, encouraging the next generation of influential women such as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell.

Hays continued to write short stories for publication until 1821 when she caught the nation's mood in *Memoirs of Queens, Illustrious and Celebrated*, galvanizing women's reaction to George IV's behaviour in 'the Queen Caroline Affair'.

To the end of her life she never forgot her debt to Robert Robertson, writing in what could be her last letter: "This Great and good man was the awakener of my mind..." (Dr Williams' Library) She died in February 1843 and in *The Christian Reformer* of September 1844 a "Memoir of Mary Hays" was published.

I hope to have given readers some idea of the fluidity and turmoil of the time in which the three women, covered in the last three pieces, lived and how, in each of their own way, made valuable contributions in the areas of education, social commentary, history of the novel, historical biography of women, history for children, and how the two Marys developing a critique of how religion informs the study of gender. In their own different ways they laid a foundation for those who followed – they blazed a trail.

Information and quotations have been taken from Mary Hays's letters and writing plus other excerpts from writing at that time in: *The Idea of Being Free – A Mary Hays Reader*: edited by Gina Luria Walker, Broadview, 2006.

Joan Wilkinson

## ELECTION PROFILES

Each candidate is required to provide a profile of not more than 250 words.

I was delighted to be asked to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming election to the NUF Committee. Since retiring as your Secretary over a year ago I have been concentrating, along with my husband, on new projects for the NUF. The e-Learning Forum, for which I am moderator, is now successfully running and I continue to co-moderate the NUF Forum with Mike Killingworth. The opportunities to expand communications and interaction for NUF members, as we explore our

understanding of faith and the expression of it, along with promoting the Fellowship, continues to be my priority. With the help of Tony McNeile and my husband, I ensure that our printed publications are recorded on CD for our audio members.

The NUF remains my spiritual home and members can be assured of my ongoing enthusiasm and input as we move into the future. However, it would be a great privilege to represent you on the Committee if I am elected.

*Joan Wilkinson*

I have been a member of the NUF for some years and have been a member of the Newcastle-under-Lyme Unitarian Meeting House for over a decade. Our congregation is a growing community – numerically, in our understanding of each other and spiritually. I am involved nationally with the Funding Development Panel and co-produce the Associate Newsletter and the national Annual Report Summary.

I am in my mid-fifties and live with my 17 year-old daughter and 12-year old dog. I am self-employed, supporting voluntary and public sector organisations in strategic planning and organisational development. I don't work full-time so as to allow time for voluntary work (and house work!).

What does it mean to me to be a Unitarian? We share much with other faiths – the desire to be nearer to the divine, the desire to better understand ourselves and others so that we are mindful in our compassion, the conviction that there are many people who would love to encounter our faith, and the joy in co-creating religious community. What is special for Unitarians is that we offer a positive view of the world, we value each person irrespective of belief, and our understanding of the divine emerges as we live our lives purposefully.

I believe that the NUF is a proactive, innovative and responsive organisation which makes a difference to the lives of its members and to the national Unitarian landscape. I would be honoured to serve its members.

*Louise Rogers*

## **HAITI DISASTER**

In light of the tragic events unfolding in Haiti, The Unitarian Peace Fellowship has announced that this year's Annual Appeal will be in favour of the people of Haiti. Rev Chris Goacher, Secretary of the UPF, said, *"It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of such a catastrophe, but we must do what we can. This is an opportunity for Unitarians to work together in a co-ordinated way to raise funds to restore peace and some stability to the people of this devastated country."*

The Committee, when it meets, will decide which emergency appeal we shall send the money to but cheques should, as always, be made payable to **The**

**Unitarian Peace Fellowship** (and 'Haiti Emergency Appeal' written on the back) and sent to: The Rev. Geoff Usher, Upper Chapel, Norfolk Street, Sheffield, S1 2JD.

## **EDEN: The Buried Treasure**

By Eve Wood-Langford.

Eve Wood-Langford a former member of Dunham Road Unitarian Chapel has written a book about the Adam and Eve myth that will delight Unitarians. When reading the ancient Mesopotamian 'Epic of Gilgamesh' Eve realised that in several important ways it paralleled the much later Genesis story of Adam and Eve. This led Eve to look deeply at the Genesis story and at the 'Unitarian literature from my youth'. In 'A Free Religious Faith: The Report of a Unitarian Commission' [Lindsay Press 1945] Eve read a reference to the Eden myth as an account of a process 'out of which have arisen all the distinctive achievements and possibilities of human life'.

For the author this 'was a revelation: buried in the garden was an inspirational meaning having nothing to do with original sin, or a fall into shame and disgrace, but something quite opposite. From that moment I wanted to know how, why, when, where and by whose actions this unforgettable myth became misinterpreted'. In chapter after chapter Eve answers these queries. In doing so she looks with deep insight and learning at the stories of the Old Testament. It is fascinating to read the book with a Bible at hand so that the interesting quotations can be looked up (I had forgotten how many accounts there are of the murder of firstborn children!). The ancient Gilgamesh epic concerned the gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon who saw humans as their servants and did not want them to aspire to wisdom. Eve explores how the Old Testament writers struggled to change the myth to a male monotheistic god – not always successfully. Eve quotes references in the Old Testament to the continued worship of other gods, some of them female. Eve notes that in the Old and New Testaments wisdom is generally lauded to the skies as something well worth having - 'The price of wisdom is above rubies' (Job 28:15-18) – and how the serpent is not generally considered evil. The author shows how the Genesis story was not about original sin (Eve shows how this idea was read back by early Christian Fathers) and that evil in the Old Testament was usually attributed to God (Isaiah 45v7 for example). It was the serpent that was telling the truth, not God.

'This magnificent myth', says Eve, symbolises the coming of wisdom, 'higher enlightenment', cognitive choice ('for good or evil'), reflective intelligence and the opening of 'the eye of the mind' to understand beauty. In the author's concluding words: The myth is about the evolution of 'a priceless faculty . . . the shimmering mental tool we call *imagination* . . .'

The book is a thoroughly enjoyable read which I heartily recommend.

*Peter B. Godfrey*

## **MYTHS TO LIVE BY**

By Joseph Campbell

This book is based on a series of lectures given by the author on mythology, the subject on which he is an acknowledged authority. It is full of many interesting things as well as recounting some delightful stories from various myths.

The author believes that historically (and even today) societies have always needed ‘myths to live by’; they form the basis of religions and rituals. Rituals, whether religious or not, give structure to societies. Structure is a feature of all life-forms and is also necessary for all societies. Through ritual we learn how to behave appropriately in a variety of situations as competent and useful members of society. When a society fails to provide, through ritual, a framework for behaviour there is a tendency to crime, vice, and mental disorder to increase. This is a current problem in the author’s opinion.



### **Joseph Campbell**

He is wholeheartedly behind such scientific advances as enabled us to put men on the moon but he realises that each advance in scientific knowledge weakens the grip of myth, ritual, tradition and religion – the things which bind society together. Myths awaken our sense of awe, gratitude, and mystery with regards to the universe but they cannot give reliable accounts of ancient events in the physical world. Yet, paradoxically, they have a truth to offer – that myths seem to have a universal nature: there is a remarkable degree of similarity in the myths gathered from all parts of the world though they would, in many cases, have developed independently of each other. His sheds light on the make-up of the human mind and points to our common humanity.

In Nature, certain creatures, right from the moment of birth, are equipped with the ability to discern which animals or birds are potential predators and must be fled from and which are non-threatening. This phenomenon has been called the ‘innate releasing mechanism’. Likewise, in humans there seems to be an innate disposition, or instinct, or genetic make-up necessary for learning one’s mother tongue so effortlessly. It has been theorised that some kind of instinctive understanding has been laid down primordially in the human mind (the so-called archetypes de-

scribed by the psychologist C. G. Jung and earlier writers) which, in expression, take the form of myths or symbols. This account of the origin of myths and symbols sees them as a product of the workings of the unconscious mind. There is another.

At the conscious level the need for myths arises from the realisation that although society or tribe may exist for thousands of years, each of its individuals must die. Mythology is an attempt to grapple with and counter this unwelcome truth. The seriousness with which the issue of ensuring a life after this one was tackled, especially by kings and rulers, is attested to by the manpower and expense which must have gone into the building of the great pyramids, cathedrals, etc.

Campbell recognises the influence of geographical circumstance in determining particular features of mythologies, comparing the myths of primitive plains peoples with those of forest dwellers. The individual is highly valued in some societies but counts for little in others. Also in humans the instinctive drives can be modified and transmuted so as to conform with a society's expected standards of behaviour. The book ranges widely over such topics as art, religion, love war and peace, schizophrenia and the Moonwalk.

The author calls for a mythology in keeping with today's science. This, to me, seems contradictory – science and myth hardly sit well together. Perhaps he intended a scientific world-view which would not exclude a proper recognition and respect for those deeper parts of our natures not yet fully understood: the instinctive, mystical and affective aspects. This science-based mythology would reject the myths on which religions are based such as the Adam and Eve story, and the myths of God's chosen people, but would replace them with a moral order and rituals enabling individuals to pursue a satisfactory and fulfilling way of life.

Whilst much human activity is economic, concerned with procuring food, water, and shelter, the book reminds us of just what a lot of activity is initiated by the mind through its imaginative and creative power, its ever questing nature, its sense of awe and wonderment. Perhaps the hyperbole of the lecture is reflected in the book, the author enthusing over the physical sciences but dismissing economics, sociology and politics as lacklustre. One detects an attitude of 'we can't change things – that's how life is – better to accept that'. Yet people, in struggle, have changed things – democracy has been established in many countries, slavery has been abolished.

*George Cope*

## **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

The following piece, by Francis Terry, has an amazing quality of speaking to us through the years. He manages to capture the universal qualities of human life whether back in 1962 or now in 2010. He would have involved himself with the difficulties facing the global community: e.g. continuing nuclear threat and escalation of war, increased pollution and global warming, ethical dilemmas surrounding genetics that continue to face us all today. He would have had a major role to play in the

Unitarian movement as we struggle with the sunset and sunrise aspects of Unitarianism today.

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **SUNSET OR DAWN**

**Francis Terry - January 1962**

As one year passes into another, we look up at the prospect before us and try to read the signs of the times. We see a sky streaked with red and swept by conflicting shades of grey and black. Is this the final sunset, in which darkness will come down upon all our lives and extinguish the hopes which lit them? Or is it the brightening dawn of all the good for which we have longed and waited leading on to fuller daylight than our twilight experience can imagine? In our ears, too, is a murmur and bubbling of water. Are we on the edge of a whirlpool of destruction, in which all existence is swept into nothingness? Or are we near to the fountain of life, eternally brimming over with new achievements and fresh hopes? The signs can be read equally well in either sense.

We all live under the menace of atomic warfare, with the possibility that any year will see the end of civilisation, of human life, perhaps of the world itself, and with no prospect of danger diminishing. If atomic disaster is avoided, we see the individual everywhere dwarfed by the huge scale of collective activities and scientific enterprises, exposed to new techniques of psychological control, and threatened with dehumanising manipulation of the central interests of personal life. But also this is the first time in which mankind all over the world has begun to function manifestly as one body, concerned with common problems and listening to the same voices: in these discussions, the principles appealed to are at least as high as at any other period, and there is no reason to believe that there is a larger admixture of hypocrisy than there has always been: men are aware, even if often ineffectively, of the respect due to human dignity, of the rights of the weak, and the needs of the poor: there are untapped resources of goodwill waiting to be brought into operation. This could be the beginning of a bright new phase of human life: it may even be necessary to pass through dangers together in order to deepen our sense of common humanity.

This ambiguous sense of being faced with what may be either a sunset or a dawn is not peculiar to our own generation. It is a constant feature of human experience – at least during its most spiritually creative periods. It was characteristic of the prophetic phase of Jewish history, and of the ‘dark ages’ in which the foundations of European and Christian civilization were laid down: and, in the New Testament, ‘It is the last hour’ alternates with ‘All things have become new’. And the same ambiguity is found at the centre of each personal situation. The child foresees a future in which it will be deprived of security and the known joys of childhood and forced to enter a region of shadowy dangers: but it also sees before it the land of promise. As we go on from there,

are we losing our youth or gaining maturity? At the end, will death be the final proof of the futility of existence, or will it reveal more fully the meaning of our life and bring us to a closer mode of union with what we have served and loved? The facts admit of either interpretation.

In this predicament we are helped by the experience of the past and by fellowship in the present. We can see how often the apparent sunset has proved to be a dawn of new good. We are offered the beliefs and traditions in which the resultant faith has been enshrined. And yet these aids to faith are not decisive or sufficient. There have been enough actual disasters in the past for us to know that there is no certainty that our fears will not be realised, and no limit to the possible dimensions of evil. Men cannot rest upon a transmitted faith, as though it were a set of facts which have been proved true once and for all. Every human situation is new and unprecedented to those who face it, and requires from each of them a new creative act of personal faith. Only on these terms can there be living fellowship of faith. That seems to be a permanent characteristic of our situation as human beings.

We are not just looking on at a situation which takes an unchangeable character from events outside our control. We are part of the situation, and, even if we have little control over the physical events, as spiritual beings we determine the character and significance of the whole. Any set of events can constitute a sunset, even a long continuance of peace and prosperity, if men have ceased to expect the present to be outshone by some fuller light to come. And any set of events, however disastrous, even to the destruction of the world, can be dawn, if it finds men walking by some light rising upon them from beyond disaster. The power which brings light into the world is working in us, as the core of our being. Men have pictured that power mythologically, as acting in the past: the earth was without form, and darkness was upon the face of the waters; and God said 'Let there be light', and the light dawned of the first day. And spiritual faith (whether we call it 'sonship to God' or by some other phrase) consists in that voice being now embodied in us and speaking through our lives. 'We are not of the night but of the day.'

*Francis Terry*

## **Hucklow Summer School**

The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire.

### **Speaking of God: Unitarian Adventures in Theology**

Theme Talk: *'Speaking of God'* with Dr. Mel Prideaux and Friends

A Choice of Engagement Groups:

- *'Experiencing God'* with Rev. Margaret Kirk and Winnie Gordon
- *'Exploring Prayer'* with Dr. Jane Blackall and Dr. Mel Prideaux

- *Icons: Windows to the Divine* with Rev. Dr. Linda Hart and Caroline Blair
- *Building Your Own Theology* with Joyce Ashworth and Rev. Maud Robinson
- Children's Programme with Peter Teets and Jim Blair

Basic Cost for Adults (shared room): £340 Some bursaries are available to help with the cost of attending. (See 'Web News')

## **JOSEPH PRISTLEY** **An Unsung Greatest Briton**

This article stems from my having taken on the persona of Joseph Priestley at the NUF Weekend at Hucklow last September. The event was a 'house party' at which the other special guests were contemporaries and fellow Unitarians from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Theophilus Lindsey (Tony McNeile) and Anna Letitia Barbould (Joan Wilkinson) both of whom were described by their portrayers in an earlier Newsletter.

A BBC programme in 2002 ostensibly celebrated the 100 greatest ever Britons. Viewers votes resulted in Sir Winston Churchill being deemed the greatest with Isambard Kingdom Brunel the runner up. Both of these merited recognition as did many of the nominees but there was a notable absentee from this list. This was Joseph Priestley. I don't know who was responsible for selecting the candidates but it isn't the first time that the establishment has overlooked Joseph Priestley's many pioneering, revolutionary contributions to science, education, theology and political thought. I am not saying that the BBC deliberately shunned Joseph Priestley, rather that they were misled by recorded history that hasn't done justice to this polymath and nonconformist luminary. It was his strident support of the French revolution that led to his vilification by the ruling classes tarnishing perceptions at the time and which has caused his omission from the pantheon of 'Great Britons'.

More of this later, but let's go back to Joseph's humble beginnings. He was born in 1733 in Birstall near Leeds, the son of cloth finisher, part of the then cottage industry. His mother died when he was a young boy so he went to live with his aunt in Heckmondwike a few miles to the south. He showed academic ability and attended the local grammar school in Batley. An early indication of his scientific prowess was when a boy he used a glass bell jar (normally used to preserve cheese) to establish that there was a gas in air consumed by animals they needed to breathe in order to live. He did this by putting a daddy long legs under the jar observing that it eventually lost consciousness but when the bell jar was lifted shortly afterwards the insect revived. Clearly air wasn't just air! There was more than one gas therein. Later on he referred to air without a gas necessary for life as dephlogisticated air. When Priestley met Lavoisier in Paris he described his find-

ings. The latter coined the term ‘oxygene’ (with Lavoisier being given the credit for ‘discovering’ it)! It was heartening to have Priestley recognised for his discovery in a recent BBC documentary on the birth of science.

Priestley’s family was Calvinist, at the puritanical end of the protestant spectrum. He had believed a conversion experience was necessary for salvation but, when seriously ill as a youth, he doubted he had had one. This led him to question his theological upbringing, causing him to dismiss election and to accept universal salvation. As a result, the church elders refused him admission as a full member. Priestley’s illness left him with a permanent stutter and a rejector of Calvinism. From Yorkshire, Priestley studied at the Daventry academy becoming a rational dissenter and nonconformist minister (only Anglicans could go to Oxbridge).



He studied the classics (Greek and Latin) and a range of subjects, not just theology, including natural philosophy (not yet known as science). After a spell as a minister in Needham Market in East Anglia, where he was considered too outspoken, he moved to Nantwich where he was made to feel more welcome. As well as taking services, he also provided Sunday School and evening classes. This education was for both children and adults (both men and women). Priestley encouraged questioning and debate which was a groundbreaking pedagogical approach compared to traditional lecturing. He also broadened the curriculum, covering subjects not normally taught (even in Oxbridge). Whilst there he published ‘the Rudiments of English Grammar.

The effectiveness and quality of his teaching was spotted by the Warrington academy where he took up a tutor’s post, teaching languages and rhetoric. Priestley wrote many papers describing his views on education which we take for granted today but which were revolutionary at time advocating liberal education when the large majority were illiterate let alone educated.

From Warrington, Priestley returned to Leeds where he became the minister of Mill Hill Chapel. He also set up a subscribing library. At that time books were very expensive. Through a membership subscription, members could gain access to books they couldn’t afford themselves, thereby widening the readership of books disseminating knowledge. Leeds subsequently converted this library to a free public lending library. Over a century later, the Scottish born American steel magnate, Dale Carnegie, endowed many free public libraries for which Priestley was an inspiration.

From Leeds, Priestley moved via a position as tutor to the children of the Earl of Shelburne in Wiltshire (which allowed him time and resources to conduct experiments) to Birmingham, where he became the minister of the New Meeting, the

name of Unitarian congregation to this day. As well as preaching he continued his scientific research.

Amongst other discoveries, he put carbon dioxide into water creating soda water, the first carbonated (fizzy) soft drink as well as isolating several gases including sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide. He also developed advances in optics, producing powerful lenses to generate high temperatures by concentrating the sun's rays and deduced the process of photosynthesis.

Priestley also wrote a history of electricity, a seminal text for over a century. Priestley was a member of the Birmingham Lunar Society which met monthly on the night of the full moon to get to their meetings safely in the days before gas lamp street lighting and denoted their interest in astronomy (as well as other areas of science and technology). Members included Boulton and Watt, pioneers of steam power and Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles, amongst others.

It wasn't just Priestley's religious views that caused controversy. As well as refuting the trinity, his political views also caused widespread consternation. Priestley spoke out in favour of the French revolution making him very unpopular with the ruling classes. At the start of the French revolution there was some sympathy for the overthrow of King Louis. France was still a largely feudal society. The emerging middle classes wanted to share in the wealth they were creating and to see the curbing of the luxury and extravagance in the palace of Versailles. The British had warred with France in the years leading up to the storming of the Bastille. The French monarchy had helped the Americans gain independence, providing troops for the decisive battle at Yorktown which ironically sowed the seeds for France's own revolution. Once the terror began any sympathy for the revolution in Britain largely evaporated.

Priestley issued a pamphlet making a metaphorical allusion to breaking down traditional barriers to rational religion and other freedoms, obliquely (and unwisely) seeming to advocate the use of gunpowder to achieve this. This was seized on and Priestley was accused of inciting revolution for which he was nicknamed 'Gunpowder Joe'. His political and religious opponents were thought responsible for a mob burning down Priestley's house in Edgbaston and the New Meeting chapel. Fortunately Priestley was tipped off and escaped to London.

Thereafter, Priestley was effectively hounded out of the country as *persona non grata* and he emigrated to the United States where he was welcomed with open arms. He was a founding member of the Unitarian congregation in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and settled in the town of Northumberland where he continued to preach and to study. He was often in the company of the likes of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States, who spoke highly of his intellect and erudition. He was a passionate about the need for the separation of state from religion which was recognised as a tenet of American governance.

I hope I have conveyed something of the many accomplishments of this remarkable man. Joseph Priestley is better known and remembered in the United States than in his home country. I hope that this article in its modest way does

something to set the record straight in helping Joseph Priestley to gain his rightful place in the pantheon of Great Britons.

*John Greenwood*

## WEB NEWS

www.pluralist.co.uk is the web site of Adrian Worsfold who is not a member of the NUF but goes primarily to the Unitarians as his 'first religious identity'. This is a large, well-stocked web site with much to interest Unitarians.

For further details of Summer School: [www.hucklowsummerschool.org.uk](http://www.hucklowsummerschool.org.uk)

The Education and Training Commission have provided us with news of all their activities and this has been added to the website at:

[www.unitarian.org.uk/info/commissions-education.shtml#feb10](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/commissions-education.shtml#feb10)

<http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/commissions-education.shtml> .

The site welcomes information like this as it keeps it up to date and shows what an activity community we are to web surfers.

## DIARY DATES

**Hucklow Summer School 21st-28th Aug** focuses on matters of religion and spirituality and intends to draw out and develop the potential of all participants. We aim to provide a balanced programme, offering a rich mix of activities for both the heart and head, and a variety of optional sessions showcasing activities which participants might "take home" and try out in their own communities. We also ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for relaxed fellowship and fun during the week. Summer School brings fellow Unitarians together and allows them to get to know each other deeply and form lasting connections.

The programme for 2010 has now been finalised and summer school is now open for applications. Click on "programme" (*left menu*) for more details of the events on offer or simply download a printable PDF application form by clicking on this button:

For further information email: [info@hucklowsummerschool.org.uk](mailto:info@hucklowsummerschool.org.uk)

## Annual Meetings 8-11 April 2010

Bookings for the Annual Meetings are due by the 25<sup>th</sup> Feb in order to avoid paying the late fee. Booking forms and other documents can be found at: [www.unitarian.org.uk/info/ga-intro.shtml](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/ga-intro.shtml)

## **NEXT ISSUE**

The deadline for the next issue is Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April 2010. Contributions on any theme and responses to any item in the newsletter are always welcome.

All contributions are acknowledged.