

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches
Established 1945

Viewpoint



The Wandering Bishops - Episcopi Vagantes

Contributed by Adrian Worsfold

Issue 217



June 2011

Registered Charity 1040294

On July 17 a Bishop-elect will take a service at Hull Unitarian Church. She will be consecrated in Swindon in September. Originally we would have had her take a service in October, so she would have been bishop, and good for a bit of publicity: however, getting in touch meant taking her more directly in what she has to offer and thus her service has been brought forward. Bishop-elect Mhoira Lauer-Patterson has since attended the Hull church to see how some Unitarians do things, and she is travelling across the Yorkshire Unitarian Union area to look at others and consequently secured an even earlier service at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds

Now let's be honest and blunt: some people who know anything about Liberal Catholics - that is the specific tradition derived from 1916 of the Wedgwood and Leadbeater variety - see them as a bit of a laugh.

It is the tradition of the wandering bishops, or *Episcopi Vagantes*, who go around the Western world making other bishops through various ceremonies and then giving themselves grand and lengthy titles that suggest a sense of puffed-up importance that simply is not reality. Where a bishop in a place attracts some sort of congregation, the tendency then is to start to ordain the congregation to become (in time) priests through a succession of minor orders. One such minor order is a Doorkeeper, and as far as I know they don't open and shut doors for such bishops or hold on to the keys. After the minor orders come the major orders, of deacons, priests and bishops.

These bishops, priests and others believe a whole variety of things, from the most liberal to the ultra-orthodox in Christian terms, associating together in either handed-down or created Churches, these Churches being top-heavy with clergy or even exclusively so.

They meet in a chapel that is a converted garage or a front room, often with an altar table against a wall due to con-

strait of space, and the handful gather to celebrate Mass, bless and ordain in all manner of robes and supporting garments.

Some of these folks had trained in denominations and, for one reason or another, never quite made it to the end. Once out and frustrated, they then find someone who will ordain them, and so receive a kind of second prize. This second prize is bolstered by the claim that, whereas Anglican orders (in particular) have long been regarded as dodgy or even null and void, as one pope said, these orders are in a recorded valid chain: so long as the ceremonies have been done properly, witnessed and recorded, whatever may be the variety of beliefs of the holders. Just in case, these ordinations and especially consecrations can be done again and again, so that a variety of lines goes back in time all to meet up in the mythic past of a first bishop called Peter or an Apostle called Thomas.

These people have been around in various worldwide places a long time; indeed, in reality, they represent more than just the Liberal Catholic tradition: every time a bishop has been cast out, others independent afterwards have been possible, and there were and are enough other Churches to generate independent bishops. Some notorious names are Jules Ferette (1828-1904) and Joseph RenÉ Vilatte (1854-1929), amongst many originals, and not a few Unitarians have been involved too.

Suddenly, however, the presence of these people today is becoming more visible thanks to the Internet. After some consecrations and ordinations, a website can be set up quickly to publicise a new or existing tiny clerical Church and all that it stands for, according to the people in it.

Unitarians aren't like this, are they? They don't 'make it up as they go along' do they? Many thousands make a Church that is longstanding and carries legitimacy, despite the longstand-

ing dismissal by the so-called mainstream, as this stream of denominational history moved from its one time Puritanism and dropped various beliefs along the way as it liberalised or self-emptied.

It is easy to be cynical and humorous, but it actually is a different exercise to treat something seriously - asking why is there that feature to that kind of Church, as opposed to this feature in this kind of Church. Numbers are pretty much irrelevant. These tiny Churches of wandering bishops do minister to people in their hundreds, so what is the difference say between a few hundred many many times and a denomination now down to a core of some four thousand with a centre imploding and some congregations existing on the tiniest of numbers week by week in patient hope of revival?

Then, what of the similarities between these Churches and the Unitarian ones, and of the cross-currents in history sometimes conveniently forgotten?

The 'clergy first' feature of these Churches actually is a legacy of how Liberal Catholicism started. In Europe the Dutch-originated Old Catholics thought there were similar English congregations waiting, desperate for clerical leadership. Arnold Harris Mathew, a one time Roman Catholic with lapses into Unitarianism, was consecrated in 1906 to be their missionary in England. The problem was there were no congregations, as he ordained or re-ordained people to be a team to do this work (some being ex-Anglicans getting reordained). The problem was that this team, with a homosexual tendency that somewhat bothered Mathew, dabbled in Theosophy. At first this was fine by Mathew, and then it wasn't, and subsequently this form of Catholicism enjoyed its first of many, many schisms, this one forming the Liberal Catholic Church. As well as Theosophy there was the connected Krishnamurti influence for a short period and even Buddhism. However, most characteristic, thanks to the consecration of Leadbeater, was the explicit importation of magic into

Catholicism. This is where the priest having being ordained enacts power in what he does at the altar; this is a magic that many a Catholic prefers to call supernatural working through the properly ordered ministry, although for others the difference between the two is splitting hairs.

So what was born in 1916 was a tradition of multi-philosophy, multi-faith, Catholic-Christian intellectual freedom along with (after some quick innovations) liturgical conservatism. We might be used to the Anglican priest who crosses his fingers while making all sorts of liturgical statements, preaching as required in a sophisticated language that allows something to sound more orthodox than it means. But in this case the combination of intellectual freedom and liturgical propriety were built into the structure from the beginning

About the same time as Liberal Catholicism was born, the Romantic movement and even the Oxford movement was having its most extreme effect on Protestants. Some non-conformists were so romanticised that they were becoming Catholic, and this happened to one Unitarian Joseph Lloyd Thomas, the minister of New Meeting Birmingham. He wanted sacraments without dogma, and he met up with William Edwin Orchard, the Congregationalist minister of Kings Weigh House in the posh Mayfair part of London. Lloyd Thomas was President of the Society of Free Catholics. Kings Weigh House was being pushed up the candle in terms of Catholic practices, outdoing the Anglo-Catholics down the road. It did though dabble in Theosophy and let the Baha'is use the building. Indeed, W. E. Orchard was able to claim that, unlike the Anglo-Catholics at Grosvenor Chapel, he and those around him had been properly ordained, in full legitimacy.

This was because he had a friend in Bishop Ulric Vernon Herford, who was a consistent supporter of Kings Weigh House and who ordained Orchard himself in 1916 - and sup-

plied five clerics in all. If you recognise the name Herford, that's because he came from a family of Unitarian ministers and was one, having had two standard ministries after training in both Manchester and Oxford, including a year in St. Stephen's House, today a frustrated hotbed of marginalised Anglo-Catholicism of the traditionalist variety.

He travelled between his home in Oxford, shared with Anglican wife and cats, and London, and he would 'do' the ministers sent to him. He ordained one Kings Weigh House priest in his house with his wife as witness, sat at the back of the room knitting, asking him to hurry up as she would miss the cakes on sale at the local shop. He didn't hurry up.

This Unitarian minister had set up a kind of monastic church in Oxford, and announced to those Unitarians keen to find a core, pure, Christianity, that he had a plan, and after correspondence set off to India to be received in a simpler Christian tradition of a Nestorian type Church, otherwise called Syro-Chaldean. His stay was fourteen days. Later on he was consecrated again for good measure. Today the British Orthodox Church, a group of Episcopi Vagantes who subsequently merged into Orthodoxy in Egypt are very keen to uphold the evidence of Herford's valid consecrations. Herford himself only consecrated one other bishop, so he was far from trigger-happy in his spreading of the episcopal dust, but his consecrated 'descendent' was much more active. Herford really did think that having proper episcopal orders was vital to the ecumenical task, and secondly so was representing a simple Christianity that all ought to accept. His Evangelical Catholic Church was so named with ecumenical intent. His liturgies, however, were Arian at best (in a Reformation sense) and when his wife died the priest who gave a trinitarian blessing was told by Herford he'd ruined the funeral at the end because the bishop was Unitarian (though she had said Anglicanism was "a lot less fuss"). Incidentally the Nicene creed was used by the Society of Free Catholics and Lloyd Thomas claimed to be trinitarian. W. E Orchard joined

the Roman Catholics in 1932, and Lloyd Thomas went into educational obscurity back in Wales.

Now in the late 1990s two active non-conformists and a Unitarian Stephen Callendar got together inspired by that Society of Free Catholics, and formed various serial liberal and Catholic leaning groups. When two were episcopally consecrated, Callendar left, and a group called The Liberal Rite was thus formed. Being asked by Sea of Faith Yorkshire to present a paper on why Liberal groups cannot get on together, I pulled on my knowledge of the Free Catholics (discovered during my year at Unitarian College), and found out about Liberal Catholicism including this new group the Liberal Rite among various other groups. I got in touch and discovered that one priest becoming bishop was Alistair Bate, a one time Unitarian himself. I even considered joining the group, but subsequently fell out with them (as people do with Liberal Catholic groups) after the leadership approached a long time Sea of Faith friend of mine to be a solitary nun and so I asked her questions that they took to be my interference. She heard my questions and turned them down.

Now when this group soon absorbed the titles of a one time active Ancient Catholic Church, they changed the name of the Liberal Rite to the Liberal Catholic Apostolic Church in March 2008. The change represented a climb up the candle and, actually, I became less interested and indeed this was when I discovered my friend had been approached.

The tiny LCAC Church soon had a schism in 2010, as they often do (because personalities and egos clash), and the LCAC founders (including Alistair Bate) left and formed an even further up the candle outfit that does not even try to associate with Liberal Catholics. What was left looked more like the Liberal Rite again, in my view, with Bishop Adrian Glover having his idea set out on the Internet of his Cross Denominational Mission. His team included an independently ordained priest Mhoira Lauer-Patterson who returned from

Australia with theological and Church management qualifications and a period of ministerial discernment with Anglicans. She moved to York. Adrian Glover is in Bournemouth, but it is in Swindon where a parish is most taking shape.

I received communication that the LCAC was still in existence; I heard about Mhoira in York, she wanted to meet, and then up came the 'open pulpit' in Hull Unitarians with ecumenical/ interfaith intentions and I said I knew who could fill it. So she met me in the church, and then the pulpit organiser came down and joined in the conversation, and we pulled her service forward in time with the possibilities of more over the boundary work, given her theological liberalism: told that she is "too modern" by Alistair Bate himself. Mhoira edits The Catholic Liberalist, a newsletter of the LCAC and she has already reported on her meetings with me and her taking a service.

Mhoira lives near York and may be able to develop a congregation around her, and I thought co-operation in Hull might be that she could develop an LCAC congregation in Hull. She has a particular personal liking for the architecture of Mill Hill Chapel and its potential, plus Leeds is her home town. Incidentally, she is an architect.

So the LCAC is a clergy led group, and indeed the congregation developing in Swindon thus involves ordinations there among the gathered.

There are thus a number of differences to be examined between Unitarians and Liberal Catholics that must be understood when co-operation is being considered.

First of all, Unitarianism is low liberal and lay-led congregationalism. Liberal Catholicism might, in extreme, believe in the priesthood of all people, but that means (according to The Young Rite) it ordains all the people who congregate. The LCAC has moved towards a Synod for decision making,

but it was bishop led and bishops controlled everything. Unitarians are anti-hierarchy by ethos.

Secondly, the evolutionary trajectory of Unitarianism has been through Protestantism, even when romanticised. Its forebears were extreme trinitarian Puritans, who left because of Romanish tendencies still in the Book of Common Prayer. Alone and relying on the Bible, they liberalised into Arminianism (of the head) and then their declining congregations were captured by ideological liberals - in other words, Presbyterian mercantilists fighting for political recognition using congregations were replaced by Unitarian capitalists fighting for political recognition using congregations - and the middle class Unitarians became a force to remove the old feudal and Church of England exclusive regime. But the Unitarians were both materialist and biblicist, only later to be effectively replaced by biblical critics and romanticists (the very opposite of the Puritans). There was a movement away from the simple preaching house, but Romanticism and the Oxford Movement came to non-conformists within Protestantism - only a very few then spilled over into Catholicism. Theological Unitarians actually mixed with those Anglicans that formed a liberal movement - also centred in Oxford - and thus who were also Protestant. The late nineteenth century synthesis by Charles Gore of Catholicism and Liberalism is now evident in Anglican Affirming Catholicism, but there is still a rump low liberalism in the Church of England that would have met Unitarians (I do know of a few: I have wanted one to consider being a Unitarian minister - and no doubt in my mind about compatibility; whereas even liberal Anglo-Catholics have to have a considerable shift of perspective, as did the late Francis Simons and yet even he retained symbolic leanings within his religious humanism).

This Unitarian evolution has been a mainly rationalist even minimalist process, whereas the multi-faith wanderings of Liberal Catholicism were towards magic and mysticism and liturgical richness. This is why Liberal Catholics perform

Mass, and why they consecrate according to 'correct' rites.

The Unitarian ministry is a professional ministry: it gets what it does through training. The training might be inadequate - I spent my time at Unitarian College asking if there was anything that could keep me busy - but the important point is that Unitarians form ministers. Liberal Catholics, like all Catholics, ordain. You might have had no training at all, but once you are 'done' then the magic dust is available. The fact is that Unitarians allow anyone to do anything, is because ministers should be more competent through training and sheer experience and dedication. Unitarian ministers should 'carry' the tradition, not because they are clergy and insiders, but because they learnt it and can express it. There is a bit of guarding, like of the GA roll - so that, for example, no matter how much I might know Unitarian history and develop a Unitarian theology, I will not be allowed on the GA roll of ministers until I have done time. Yet I could be 'done' tomorrow by any Liberal Catholic seeking to add to the ordained numbers. There could be a second Bishop Adrian quite easily and the right group might do it all in a day.

Now it might be said that the Church of England or Roman Catholic Church does not act like this: it does not ordain willy nilly and so the Church of England (at least) is like the Unitarian (or the Unitarian is like the Church of England). We all form ministers. But this is not quite so. It is rare but from time to time a minister is rushed through to ordination, and the point is that once a bishop ordains and once bishops consecrate the ministry is therefore ordered and recognised.

By dropping ordination unless inherited, acquired in Northern Ireland or sought, Unitarians have had to take the training route. It is by rules that the GA list of professional ministers is guarded.

It is interesting just how little one denomination recognises the ministry of another. The Church of England does look

both ways, so that it will regard non-conformist ministers as legitimate and ordained: it is just that if they come into Anglicanism they need to be ordained episcopally. A Methodist minister on his own becomes a lay Anglican. Roman Catholics recognise no Anglican ordinations as sacramental, despite the fact that hands belonging to Old Catholic bishops and ex-Roman bishops have hovered over Anglican heads. Of course an evangelical Anglican will look at the Presbyter in the Bible and regard ministers of other Churches as having validity, but neither Catholic nor Reformed Anglican will recognise Unitarian ministers because they are un- or inadequately ordained, and doctrinally out of court.

Anglicans, especially Anglo-Catholics, might regard Old and Liberal Catholics as validly ordained - and indeed many sought the reordination hands of Arnold Harris Mathew (much to the irritation and worry of the Archbishop of Canterbury as to what Mathew was intending), but the Church of England does not recognise Liberal Catholics or Old Catholics in terms of one of its listed ecumenical partner Churches. So, much as the (Old Catholic inspired) Open Episcopal Church might want to be ecumenical, it is not on an approved C of E list despite reciting the Nicene Creed and having three major orders of ministry.

So it isn't just about the validity of the linkage and ordination rites, but denominational rules. But there is something further here. An Anglican writing to a Unitarian minister will still write Rev. just as one might write Rabbi. It is a form of courtesy and some form of recognition, and at the least the Unitarian meeting the Liberal Catholic should still address them as Reverend or Bishop - because they are so of their own Churches. They have obeyed their rules.

Recently there was a big row in small circles when a woman claimed to be a bishop after a Young Rite bishop had apparently consecrated her. He hadn't and her evidences were in the 'Photoshop' style. Now she might still go about calling

herself bishop (though she's admitted he didn't do it), but if she does then it is not by the rules of that community, and we might ask whether she deserves the title, even though she could have been made so at a whim had it happened.

But all this is so silly, some Unitarians will claim. After all, Unitarians don't have bishops. Really? I keep adding another and another to my tally. For example, we have two in the central European tradition (with a catechism) - one of Hungary and one of Transylvania. Now when Knut Heidelberg of Norway was ordained in Hungary, it was specifically mentioned that these bishops are not apostolic as this is not believed. Knut Heidelberg is himself a Superintendent Minister, and he has connected himself with another such overall Minister, Rev. Maurisa Brown (USA) of the non-UUA Unitarian Ministries International, that includes some Unitarian Christian Association members in its British membership. I notice that its main page displays the newer British Unitarian logo, the more three dimensional chalice design. That's naughty. We might regard the UMI as a kind of 'Liberal Protestant version of Unitarianism' in the manner parallel of Liberal Catholics - after all, anyone can set up a website and start attracting members. In Britain there is the New Horizons Church UK connecting to Yeshua International and the Old Roman Catholic Church in England (of the Arnold Harris Mathew line). New Horizons Church UK is committed to creating religious freedom and will join trinitarians and unitarians together.

There is a Unitarian bishop in the United States who is part of the UUA: he is Bishop Carlton Pearson, the ex-fundamentalist and charismatic who became a universalist in theology and annoyed all his former friends. So he brought his loyal rump church into the UUA. Then there are some bishops in Kenya overseeing a couple of bunches of churches, being a father and a son, and one of the wives of the father bishop runs a congregation. Apparently in Africa there is the phenomenon of the Post Office denomination, where a church leader goes into the Post Office, uses the

Internet computer there, discovers Unitarianism on the web, likes its autonomy and then converts all the churches to Unitarianism in one go. Bishops can do this and Bishop Patrick Magara converted his groups in one act.

I've long thought that British Unitarians ought to have bishops, by which I mean people on the GA Roll paid regionally or by the General Assembly who can on an educational facilitating principle co-ordinate churches, train up lay leaders, offer support and generally travel around. It would counter the complete DIY congregationalism that leaves some churches wealthy and ministry rich and some desperate; some churches with reasonable attendances cannot afford ministers and yet others with a few can if they want them. There's just so little planning, so little governance worth the name and some churches fall by the wayside thanks to general ignorance.

There are several possibilities ahead, being creative (if Unitarians can be creative). I am imagining here, regarding the bishop-elect, and this is without consulting others. She may take a service, and, on the basis that she can, goes on to take some more. She might offer further services of ministry on a still cross-denominational model. She might - well if it is possible - do some courses of Unitarianism and then be in both Churches. She might make contact with several Unitarian churches from her base in York, offer her services and almost become something of a co-ordinator yet from outside - being bishop-like. It could actually be quite interesting. Originally I had thought only in terms of her developing her own congregation and having some cross fertilisation with Unitarians and comparing notes; indeed, I had only just stopped trying to appeal to an Anglican to come over (that really would have required a transfer of denomination if from within the job). All this is thoughts about a potential vacancy and yet lack of candidates and creative solutions to open up possibilities.

It's absolutely not up to me, but the congregation of course can accept or reject anything: but what's happened is that both these contacts via me are a direct result of the Internet and from both websites and social media. And it is in the context of the Internet that Liberal Catholicism becomes more possible. The website is an independent priest's and bishop's shop window, and I have noticed people not just grabbing at ordination but actually deciding to leave the salaried Church of England to go independent. Jonathan Blake did, and as a bishop he heads up the Open Episcopal Church, but he is being followed by others making the risky plunge. In other words, it isn't just those who, for one reason or another, didn't 'make it' (even if they come to prefer independence). These who choose independence also become doctrinally liberated, and set up flexible rites of passage ministries and do other religious work - like taking services in churches - to get an income like a business. They realise that they were religious humanists all along, or perhaps a bit magical, or have some ideological combination different from

the mainstream generality. Some of course do a secular job or are otherwise retired and do as much ministry as they may - say doing counselling for little payment.

Let's be clear. The future for Unitarianism may well be as much online and semi-independent. The congregational model might itself metamorphose into a set of empty regional properties that can be used for arranged face to face meetings. We may make more and more use of Great Hucklow and less use of churches (I think Unitarian College should be based in the Nightingale Centre, and maybe even Unitarian HQ). There isn't so much difference between a small gathering meeting on a Sunday and a handful building themselves up on a clergy-first model, especially if the gathered get ordained.

The communications environment is shifting, so it is time to be creative with ministerial resources, and the liberal groups

ought to be so with one another.

Adrian Worsfold.

Adrian is a member of the Hull congregation

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

*Tony McNeile,
102 Turton Rd,
BOLTON.
BL2 3DY*

or E-mail to nuf@nufonline.org.uk

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Articles for the Viewpoint to:

Rev. Tony McNeile
102 Turton Road
BOLTON
BL2 3DY

or

Seeking information about the
National Unitarian Fellowship?

Web site: www.nufonline.org.uk

or

E-mail: nuf@nufonline.org.uk