

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Unitarians & Social Responsibility

Louise Rogers & Tony Cann

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Introduction

Louise Rogers, in the first piece, gives us a comprehensive examination of both private and public morality, stressing the importance of working out what our behaviour and morality means to us in our closest relationships within the family. She ranges widely over written material, both by the General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christians, as well as literature in books and on the Internet. Her wealth of experience working within the sphere of social responsibility throughout her life, added to her present support for her elderly mother, results in a well-informed piece of writing

The second piece by Tony Cann, complements Louise's essay. Whilst recognising that our behaviour is a result of what we think, he acknowledges the personal but concentrates on social action and responsibility within community, inclusive of both race and creed. Both pieces note that when we think of others without expecting return, this results in doing the right thing. However, Tony does acknowledge that thinking of others, in both the small things and the big, can make us feel better about ourselves. Generosity of both time and spirit in the pursuit of welfare for all, in both our personal interactions, religious and social action, underpins the morality and behaviour of both our writers.

Joan Wilkinson

How do we live Unitarian lives within our families?

By Louise Rogers

Introduction

Many or perhaps most religions tell people how they must behave in terms of a code for living. Sometimes this is about morality and sometimes about daily living. This may include marriage responsibilities; whether people may divorce and remarry; the food people may eat; issues about medical care; rules for funerals and if a burial or a cremation is allowable. We have seen these change over time, but they still exist.

Many of the codes for living may be found in holy books. The Bible may be a good starting point, an interesting article on the Huffington Post website says this:

So back to our original question: Is the Bible a reliable moral guide? If with this question we are asking whether we can look to the Bible as a kind of divine or ancient reference book, finding direct answers to today's moral questions, I'll offer a definitive "no." But if we instead wonder whether reading the Bible can lead to useful reflection on the moral life and aid one in making ethical decisions, then I'll advance a "yes" that is simultaneously bold and cautious. Bold because I believe that the Bible can be a profound guide to life, but cautious in that I want to acknowledge that that guidance often comes to us "sideways." That is, the Bible is most interested in inviting us to understand the meaning of this mysterious life we share by inviting us into relationship with God, a relationship that in turn offers counsel regarding the variety of moral choices before us. So mystery and meaning, I would argue, come before morality on the pages of Scripture.

David Lose, Senior Pastor, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church
(Minneapolis, MN)

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/bible-reliable-moral-guide_b_1097800.html?guccounter=1

We may reflect on the Bible and other sacred writings, but ultimately our conscience will decide. Does this mean that we each take an individual approach with no thread which binds us?

Where can we find clues about whether Unitarians and Free Christians have some kind of agreed set of principles or morals; and how does our faith impact on how we behave?

The General Assembly

The General Assembly's website on the page entitled, 'What we stand for' at the end of the section on 'Personal morality' says this:

We are all individuals, with a right to our own beliefs, but we are also members of society with a responsibility to help make it work. As such it is incumbent upon each of us to behave in ways that respect others and make our community, and our world, a better place for everyone.

<https://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/what-we-stand>

It also says this in the section on 'Is there a Unitarian morality?'

With our belief in individual religious freedom, can Unitarians give any moral guidance? If Unitarians are free to "build their own theology", are we not free to build our own morality? Can there be any shared moral standards, or are all free to behave as they please?

One point a Unitarian might make is that unless your moral standards are truly your own, then they do not really constitute morality. If they

are simply imposed on you, then they are just a means of social control and nothing more. Of course, a commonly accepted "moral framework" must exist in any human society. But this is not enough, unless people also have a personal morality, an ethical code that is truly their own.

A Unitarian view of morality does not favour untrammelled individualism. Unitarian acceptance of the underlying unity and connectedness of humanity comes into play here. We don't live in isolation. We are members of society, with a responsibility to help make it work. We may be individuals, with a right to our own beliefs, but we are also social beings. As such it is incumbent upon each of us to behave in ways that respect others and make our community, and our world, a better place for everyone. In building a personal morality we may well learn from the teachings and example of others, but the crucial point is to make it ours. One of the traps in the area of morality is to pay more attention to other people's behaviour than to one's own. Judgmentalism and self-righteousness can result.

Unitarians are suspicious of any morality that is too rigid in its decisions or which is lacking in mercy. Such "morality" often comes with a religious label attached. But a liberal religious Unitarian morality offers another model: one that imposes the highest standards on oneself, while treating others with justice and compassion.

Which sounds fine but really gives the context without much about the content. What actually is our morality – how do we define the highest standards? And when does individual morality become something that we share?

The family

I find that what is missing from much of our writings is writing about

the family. Not a definition of what a family is – because I think that we Unitarians and Free Christians have gone beyond prescriptive descriptions of what a ‘proper’ family might look like. Most, if not all, of us would believe a family is that group of people, or one person on their own, who consider(s) themselves to be a family.

We write a fair amount about our responsibilities towards our fellow citizens and people across the globe, but what about our responsibilities towards our nearest and dearest, and towards ourselves? Do we think that there is general agreement about how we should behave? And if there is, what is that consensus?

Universal morality

Wikipedia says this about universal morality

The "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" from the Parliament of the World's Religions (1993) proclaimed the Golden Rule ("We must treat others as we wish others to treat us") as the common principle for many religions. The Initial Declaration was signed by 143 leaders from all of the world's major faiths, including Baha'i Faith, Brahmanism, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous, Inter-faith, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Neo-Pagan, Sikhism, Taoism, Theosophist, **Unitarian Universalist** and Zoroastrian.

And explores further:

The maxim may appear as either a positive or negative injunction governing conduct:

One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself (positive or directive form).

One should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated (negative or prohibitive form).

What you wish upon others, you wish upon yourself (empathic or responsive form).

*The Golden Rule differs from the maxim of reciprocity captured in *do ut des*—“I give so that you will give in return”—and is rather a unilateral moral commitment to the well-being of the other without the expectation of anything in return.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule

Is this enough to guide us in defining our own personal morality which then goes onto inform how we behave within our families?

Social morality

Social morality is the shared moral principles of any society – to some extent the Unitarian and Free Christian community has a set of shared principles. Looking at the preamble to the General Assembly’s object we can extract some key phrases

Uniting in a spirit of mutual sympathy, co-operation, tolerance and respect;

Recognising the worth and dignity of all people;

Recognising their freedom to believe as their consciences dictate; and

Believing that truth is best served where the mind and conscience are free (which hints at value being given to ‘Truth’).

<https://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/our-object-and-constitution>:-

And from the Object itself:

The service of humanity; and

Respect for all creation;

When reflecting on morality and values of a faith community I suppose the question has to be, do these just apply to us within our religious community, when we represent that community or work for it, or does everyone who says they are a Unitarian have to live by these principles?

Personal morality

Personal morality which is described on the GA's website as ... *the values and principles that we each try to live by*. Sometimes we want these values to be shared with others and may campaign to that end, but sometimes they just apply to us. The more power we have, the more we are able to influence the principles which we believe others should live by, for example if we were a politician or senior cleric. Personal morality is an aim. Many of us fall short of what we consider to be right relationship and right action. Sometimes we learn and change: sometimes we don't.

Does each Unitarian's personal morality spring from the General Assembly's or have to be in some way related. In the very least, perhaps we would expect each Unitarian's personal morality not to be at odds with these GA principles.

Principles in everyday living

Once we have consciously, or often unconsciously, decided what our personal morality is, how do we live it within our families? Some thoughts as questions:

Roles and relationships

What do we expect of ourselves in terms of our input to the family and our behaviour towards family members?

What do we expect of our family members in terms of their input to the family and their behaviour towards us and towards others?

Are we compassionate, truthful and faithful?

Where is self-care in our lives? Do we misuse substances; deprive ourselves of sleep; eat junk food; spend money we don't have; work in overly stressful jobs; and fail to ask for help when we need it?

Do we always treat people as we would like to be treated?

Daily living

What is our environmental impact?

Where do we shop?

What food do we eat/not eat?

Where do we bank?

How do we spend our money?

Are we a responsible pet owner?

There are many more questions we could ask ourselves. Is there a Unitarian and Free Christian imperative to question ourselves about how we live our lives at home? Does our faith make a difference to how we behave? Could our faith community make our lives easier by providing help and support to family life? Perhaps it already does, where are the examples of this?

Does being a Unitarian make a difference?

How do we know if our Unitarianism impacts on our behaviour, if

without our faith we would act differently? I reflect now on my caring role.

I have been helping my mum out by living with her for nearly five years. Before that I would visit every month to ensure that she was OK, but it was a constant worry in between visits, which started when I got in the car to drive home each month. I was in the fortunate position that I could move 150 miles from home, with no family at home and working as a freelancer, it was not a difficult choice. What would I have done if I had had someone else at home or a job based locally? I honestly don't know.

I didn't consider myself a carer for a couple of years and I still have problems with the term, but it does open doors. I am very lucky that I am semi-retired and am only in paid employment for two days a week. I am extremely fortunate that I have family who help out and do things that I am not too good at, like gardening (although I do like my pots) and fixing things round the house. Even younger members of the family come to stay with granny so that I can go out with friends.

I have come across a lot of carers in Unitarian and Free Christian circles, and elsewhere. People's experiences are different, the personalities and abilities of who they care for are very different, their financial situations are different, their family circumstances are different but practically everyone wishes that they could do more – really what we wish is that we could magically turn back the clock to when caring wasn't needed, not for ourselves but for our loved ones. But we are only human and cannot turn back time.

I think that whether I was a Unitarian or not, I would be in the same position – it was my living situation that enabled me to do this and

the fact that I have always got on well with my mum.

But what would have been different is, first, how supportive individual people are. I have not joined a local Unitarian community where my mum is, as I still feel rooted in North Staffordshire. But it is individual Unitarians who have provided support – our small ECU/MDA choir Echoes has been great for me to meet Unitarians face-to-face whilst engaged in something enjoyable. Emails and phone calls, and Facebook posts have kept me involved and everyone asks how mum is. And I still get invited to things. Although, often these days, I have to decline.

Second, I see it as part of my spiritual journey. Sometimes it is hard, as I juggle my needs with my mum's. Often the uncertainty is unsettling - the biggest question that I have yet to answer, is 'Where is home?' But mainly I feel blessed to be able to help my mum and to grow closer to my brothers in the process. Previously I have served by being on boards and making organisations work better, now it is hands on personal care for one person. Each act has value.

Bigger issues that play out in the family

Often within families the bigger issues in the outside world can and do present themselves for example gender inequalities; intergenerational living; disability; religious and political differences; and financial resources. Are our behaviours within the family congruent with the beliefs that we espouse outside of our families?

Take gender for example, I remember Peggy Seeger remarking about her husband Ewan MacColl and other male folksingers, who would go out at night to sing about social issues, assuming that their wives would stay at home to look after their children. These radical men also expected their wives to take on a traditional woman's role within

the family and within the household.

I have heard men at work talking about how they had to baby-sit their own children. I point out that we don't baby-sit our own children. Being there for our children, making sure that they are safe and cared for, is being a parent. Who does what and when, is a negotiation between those with parental responsibilities (parents and carers).

I ask of us all, that if we are committed to gender equality in the wider world (and I hope that we all are) then are we committed to gender equality within the home – and I might add, within our local religious communities? What have we done and what are we doing to make this equality real?

A mantra of the woman's movement was that the personal is political. There is discussion about what it originally meant, but for me one meaning is that we experience inequalities in our personal as well as our public lives. If equalities are important to us, we need to be self-critical and attempt to make our actions congruent with our beliefs and values. The other issue for me is that gender is not a woman's issue – it is a human issue. This has changed over my adult lifetime, with men engaging more in the debates, which is heartening.

We must also seed change in our own lives, in our own families, behind closed doors we must make this change real. I imagine that my daughter was heartily fed up of me commenting on female pop stars dancing around in their knickers, when male pop stars were fully clothed. Yet so many inequalities are just part of how we live, that I believe we need to at least note them.

And being challenged by young people within our families can be unfamiliar territory when we are used to being the ones in charge. It is much easier if we embrace it and reflect, whether ultimately we

agree or not.

What of the tension that we feel between being loving and acting justly. UUA minister Forrest Church said this

“It is hard to open our arms to embrace another’s problems when they contribute to our own ... When we are the victims of our supplicant, it is far easier to turn our back than to turn the other cheek.

“As in enlightened society, in our families we do our best to strike a balance between love and justice. The problem is that love and justice operate according to very different sets of rules...Rather than a reward for good behaviour, love, like home, is something we somehow haven’t to deserve.”

pp 124-5, Chapter 7: The Home Fires: in Bringing God Home by Rev Forrest Church. (*I would recommend this book*)

Behaviour and ageing

It is not just what we say but how we act. Children learn most by copying. They copy how their parents behave, how other family members behave, how their teachers and friends behave. And as they get older, by the behaviour they see on a variety of media.

So, it is incumbent upon us as parents, aunts, uncles, friends of people who have children, grandparents and people in religious community to act in a way that we would wish these children to behave. We must be respectful, kind, and reasonable. In fact, we must live our personal morality.

As we get older, we have to be careful of ‘older person speak’. Things such as ‘back in my day’; or ‘young people today!’ said with exasperation.

I have seen posts on Facebook looking back fondly to the Hovis-ad past with rose-coloured spectacles, as if nothing bad ever happened. Things like racism, sexism, the awful treatment of disabled people and people with mental health needs, the difficulties faced by gay people and the tacit acceptance of sexual violence – these and many more things are nothing to look back fondly on.

If the past was so much better then it is the older generation's fault that things have got worse; conversely if things have got better, perhaps we have made a positive difference.

There are also, often unsaid, feelings of 'I'm too old to change now'. No-one is too old to change – people may be too stubborn to learn and to change; maybe too lazy; may want a seemingly-valid excuse for prejudice and intolerance.

But those of us with many years of learning and growing must not stop, must continue to learn - only perhaps we need some humility to learn from younger people; and have the wisdom to accept that the world has changed, and we need to change with it – we may not be the change-makers now, but so what? We must continue to be role models, to model ageing well.

Things that a faith community can do.

What should be the role of our faith community in helping us live our ethical lives, in providing support and a space to learn and to grow? What do we, as individuals, need to contribute to our faith community to make that happen, and happen effectively?

What kind of church do you dream of when it comes to supporting us all to live a better life? To become a better person? To help others to achieve the same.

I dream of a church which does not accept bad behaviour. Just as we are role models for our children and the children of others within our communities, so the General Assembly, the districts, societies, congregations and fellowships should be role models for us all. It is often the little things – so we promote radical welcome, but many times I have sent an email to a Unitarian in an official position and not got a reply, which suggests to me that some people struggle with non-radical, good manners. As with most things we need to get the basics right first.

I dream of a church which is self-reflective, and bold. Of a church which helps me to live my values and principles; and where I am enabled to help others do the same.

Conclusion

Our faith must not only impact on society in general but on us and on our families.

If compassion is key to our faith, then it must infuse all our lives.

If fairness and justice are key to our faith, they must infuse all our lives.

And if our faith tradition promotes the seeking out of truth, then we must be true to ourselves so that our internal lives, match our outward actions - our actions within and without the family.

This should be an exciting challenge for us all.

The Necessity for Social Action

By Tony Cann

We do not live in a private bubble. We are part of our church local, national and global community whether we like it or not. Our lives are affected by those around us and in the wider community. We too affect those around us by what we do and



what we are. We are influenced by our backgrounds, the people we mix with and our education. We need continually to learn and modify our own attitudes in the light of experience. Whether we are Christian, agnostic, Muslim, or have experienced any other background what we learn influences who we are. We live in a world which is becoming smaller and we need to live with others who do not have exactly the same background as ourselves.

We are distinguished by our own ideas and how we react with the differing ideas of others. We need to look after ourselves, but we also need to engage in the wider community and help it to thrive. One evangelical looking at the state of her local communities said we needed to pray more. Of course, we can but at the end of the day it is what we do that matters. We might be motivated by our ideas, our background or our faith, but it is what we do at the end of the day that determines what kind of human being we are and our makeup. We must graduate from the 'little boxes' in which we sometimes exist. The Great Spirit acts through others and each of us in what we DO. We are the means through which God acts – you and me. Prayer opens us up to take action, but we need to embrace those acts.

Many people suffer from depression these days. Perhaps social action might be their most effective prescription. Not directed to them but

by them. Meeting and working with others may be an effective cure. Living in our little boxes frightened of communicating with others in case we are seen to be the imperfect people we are can be one factor causing depression and illness. Self-centeredness can be a prescription to poor physical and mental health.

Traditional views of God are under attack. Does it matter exactly what one's views of God are? It can be argued that our destiny when we die depends on what our place was when we were living. Our journey is a continuation into the world of The Great Spirit which we join or don't join. For me, it does not matter a jot whether we follow, God, Muhammad or no one. We will in today's world find it difficult to attract people to our community based on their many different belief patterns, but perhaps we can galvanise people on the basis of undertaking some action to make the world a better place TOGETHER.

Social Responsibility is about us taking action. Not only to help others, but to help ourselves. However, when we engage in positive actions together, they become richer and make a greater impact. Sometimes this takes personal sacrifice, yet in collectively taking action we experience comradeship and make a greater difference. We need to engage in social action with other members of our congregations, with other denominations and with other faiths and none.

I cannot explain it, but I am driven towards social action. I joke sometimes that as Unitarians cannot be saved by their beliefs, we have to be saved by what we do and of course by what we are which is a reflection of what we do.

What is being saved to me? It is a feeling of happiness as a result of what I do. Helping an old lady down some stairs – knowing that I have helped an ex-prisoner get a job. Deep down I feel better and there-

fore this prompts me to act better too. Social action causes me to look beyond being solely for myself. But, actually, I have found that the return from undertaking social action activities outside of myself always seems to give me a wonderful return. I volunteered for a taxing position some years ago and it led me to one of my most successful businesses. Perhaps the most wonderful benefit was meeting my late wife when I did youth work in a deprived area of Manchester 60 years ago where I also met some Unitarians... I could go on and on.

So, in the East Lancashire Collaborative Ministry we are rebuilding Rawtenstall Unitarian Church. We have done the physical refurbishment of the building and now for the people part. We are going to hopefully inspire people to get involved by setting ourselves up as the Unity Centre for Social Action to bring people out into the community to help make a difference. We will engage with Unitarians and people of all faiths and none. We will help reboot the idea that real meaning lies not with what we have, but in what we do. Not what we each believe, but what action we are taking beyond ourselves into the community and society in which we exist. Churches in order to be healthy need to be outward looking.

We want to provide the platform within the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry for more social action projects and the ability to undertake these activities together. Let us help and campaign to help those with mental difficulties. Let us work together to help refugees and asylum seekers. Let us help those who are just out of prison. Let us use the Unity Centre at Rawtenstall Church to build a multi faith centre for Social Action.

Comments -

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

Please send your comments to the editor:

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National Unitarian Fellowship

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