

# THE HERALD

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## Could sacraments save us? by Bill Darlison ... p7

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Cover Photo: *The Rev Bill Darlison conducts a christening at Dublin Unitarian Church. Note that he is handing over a ball which bears a map of the world.*

## Editorial: A modern spiritual search

A young Unitarian recently applied to join the Unitarian Christian Association (the UCA). In his letter, he explained the background to his decision, which I think typifies the search for genuine spirituality among so many young people today. He’d first joined a Unitarian congregation in England (on the ‘humanist/renewal side’) in the 1990s, while in his 20s. He did some lay preaching and became involved in District activities.

But anti-Christian strands he encountered, plus the search for more ‘spiritually-fulfilling worship and fellowship’, led him away from the Unitarians to the Baptists. He liked their more accessible worship, but was put off by Biblical literalism and social conservatism. He found local Anglican and Catholic representatives too establishment and hierarchical, and so he drifted into secular political activity while ‘evading deeper spiritual engagement’.

Yet he’s now returned to a Unitarian congregation with a new minister, and feels convinced this is the right place for him to be. He’s enthusiastic about possibilities for spiritual renewal offered by a renewed liberal/Unitarian Christianity. He writes:

*There is an urgent need for the re-spiritualising of Unitarian worship and a huge opening for free, post-modern and progressive forms of Church and*

*worship that can meet the spiritual hunger of our communities. It is not exaggerating to say that a new, spirit-filled and inspired movement could carry out a 'home mission' that might actually have a chance of success. When we look at the numerically-successful church forms in 21st Century Britain like Pentecostalism, Charismatic and Post-Modern Emerging Evangelicals, can we not envisage how a free and scripturally non-literalist Christian movement might take the best of their practice forward while leaving their stumbling blocks of rigid creedal tests behind?*

We officers of the UCA will, I am sure, heartily agree with these sentiments! But, as always, the tricky part is how we carry such a programme forward within our denomination. Nevertheless, as our new member suggests, it is essential we do so if our free religious faith is to survive.

I hope this Autumn edition of *The Herald* will provide some pointers to how we might go about this. Firstly, Bill Darlison offers compelling arguments for bringing symbol and sacrament (back) into our services and rites of passage ceremonies – based on his highly-successful ministry at Dublin Unitarian Church. If this does not happen, he warns, our chapels seem destined to become carpet warehouses.

Of course for many Unitarians, embracing symbolic worship will mean moving beyond our comfort zones and confronting anti-Christian prejudice (isn't it extraordinary how we Unitarians claim to be open to all religions, and yet so often we retain strong prejudice against Christianity, particularly mainstream Christianity?). Yet, reviving symbolic worship need not be about returning to 'traditional' Christianity, it can be about finding modern (or post-modern) forms too. And anyway, as Bill Darlison points out, all the sacraments of the Catholic Church have their origins in earlier mystery religions. None are preserves of a single tradition. Let us start using them!

This point is reinforced by the Moderator's Letter. Jeff Gould writes of how he enjoys drawing on the great variety of worship styles offered by different manifestations of Christianity, as he recounts two historic encounters with other Christian traditions. This is the spirit we need if we are to move forward.

Ruth Rowntree offers a fascinating glimpse of Jesus through non-Roman eyes, by bringing together three manuscripts on early Christianity which have come to light in the past 100 years – from Taoist Christianity, Buddhism and the Gospel of Thomas. Tom McCready follows by focusing on new insights offered by the Gospel of Thomas. This is what our free religious faith encourages: that we learn all we can from non-canonical sources too. Also: Linda Hart unravels dreams and parables; I look at the changing nature of Unitarian belief; and Jim Robinson and Yvonne Aburrow describe leading Tenebrae services – reviving a hallowed form of symbolic worship.

But we want our members and supporters to do more than merely read articles. So, in this edition, you will find details of the Lance Garrard Lecture for 2010, which will introduce us to Orthodox Christianity. And then two workshops: on how to conduct Taizé worship (led by Jeff Gould and Catherine Fozard); and on how to bring sacraments into our

services and rites of passage ceremonies (led by Bill Darlison). These workshops are aimed primarily at worship leaders, but all are welcome to attend and enjoy the experiences offered.

Finally, let us note two points about our wider Unitarian and Free Christian denomination. First, the Executive Committee has decided **not** to pursue proposals to drop the words 'Free Christian' from our name – a wise decision in our view. The second? Well, our small denomination is once again at the forefront of the fight for equality. Only three faith groups from the Judaeo-Christian tradition in Britain – Unitarians, Quakers and Liberal Jews – were prepared to give crucial support to the Equality Bill by saying they wanted their own religious premises (in England and Wales) to be allowed to celebrate same-sex civil partnerships. Through this support, the Bill passed in April; consultations are now going on over its implementation. So once again the creedless denominations have taken the moral high-ground -- as we Unitarians did in 1903 when we welcomed the first woman minister in Britain. We are proud of our denomination – and this latest action has brought us much credit among religious liberals of all persuasions. We should record too that a key figure in bringing our denomination's support to the Equality Bill was our current UCA Moderator, Jeff Gould – in his position as (the then) chair of the Faith and Public Issues Commission of our General Assembly. We have much to be thankful for – may it spur us on to even greater activity!

**Jim Corrigan is Honorary President of Golders Green Unitarians, and a lay pastorate student at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.**



**The Unitarian Christian Association is an affiliated society  
of the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches, which has as its Object:**

*'To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship  
of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity  
and respect for all creation; and the upholding  
of the liberal Christian tradition.'*

# Moderator's Letter: Out and about ...

I make no apologies for the fact that I am a true 'ecu-maniac', and enjoy drawing from the great variety of styles of worship and private devotion that are offered by the different manifestations of Christianity. This past Spring, I was honoured to represent the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches at two church gatherings that emphasised for me the importance of engaging with Christian traditions beyond the familiarity of our own movement.

All Souls' Church in Belfast hosted a Centenary Choral Service on the afternoon of Sunday, 25th April to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (the NSPCI). The sun shone, and members and friends of this sister denomination of ours in Ireland, flocked to the magnificent church for a true celebration. The Rev Chris Hudson introduced a diverse collection of solo and group vocalists and instrumentalists, and the congregation was inspired by the musicianship of the musical director, Mark Mooney, to sing hymns that were representative of different shades of Christian identity. One of the most moving contributions was the singing of Psalm 23 in Hebrew by a liberal Jewish man, whose wife is a member of the All Souls' congregation.

The Very Reverend William McMillan (a retired NSPCI minister and former Moderator) delivered a stirring address, exhorting those present to be true to the origins of the Non-Subscribing faith by continuing to embrace diversity of belief and extend tolerance beyond the safety of what is already known. It was my pleasure to extend the greetings of both the General Assembly and the Unitarian Christian Association on this day of celebration.

The order of service revealed the true spirit of the event, as it ended with the printed words: "All Souls' is an inclusive Church welcoming all, irrespective of race, colour, creed and sexuality." Truly, the Spirit of God was with us!

The printed order of service provided the following précis of the NSPCI:

*The history of Presbyterianism in Ireland can be traced back to 1613. The first Non-Subscribing Presbytery was formed in 1725, and our most notable historical leader, Dr Henry Montgomery, took a leading part in the controversy in the 1820s that led to the formation of the Non-Subscribing Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. Our Church refuses to impose compulsory subscription to any man-made creeds in respect of a person's Christian faith. Our ethos is 'faith guided by reason and conscience,' and we advocate liberal and tolerant Christianity.*

*The Remonstrant Synod and the Presbytery of Antrim grew closer together and eventually, in 1910, they united to form the General Synod of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. In 1935 the Synod of Munster, an old and historic Non-Subscribing Synod, was welcomed into fellowship with the Non-Subscribing Church.*

In marked contrast with the events of the NSPCI anniversary celebrations, I was invited

to take part in a special evening of welcome to the Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, who serves as the senior cleric in the United Kingdom of the Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Kallistos was the guest of honour at a service of evensong at Manchester's Anglican Cathedral. It was moving to be surrounded by ecumenical colleagues representing diverse traditions, from the Salvation Army to the Roman Catholic Church, while Orthodox clergy moved in their eastern vestments down the aisle of the cathedral.

A buffet meal was then served in the side aisle of the cathedral, and was followed by an hour-long lecture give by the Metropolitan on Orthodox relations with other churches. I found both the presentation and the content of the lecture riveting, as Kallistos Ware managed to offer both humour and substance. It was clear that issues such as women's ordination and the acceptance of homosexual clergy continued to be stumbling-blocks in ecumenical conversations, but that a spirit of co-operation does indeed exist amongst the many different Christian communions. It was moving to find how warm a reception I was given, as the ambassador of a tradition that is radically different from Orthodoxy.

UCA members and friends are encouraged to learn some of the history of this branch of Christendom and understand contemporary trends within its ranks, at our Autumn gathering at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, on Saturday 30th October. Here, the Reverend Canon Hugh Wybrew will offer an introduction to Orthodoxy. Canon Wybrew served as the Archbishop of Canterbury's official representative to the Orthodox Church in several Warsaw Pact countries in the Soviet era, and was also the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem. His talk promises to be both entertaining and informative (*See Forthcoming Event*).

**The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould is Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association.**



## **WHO NEEDS SACRAMENTS? – a workshop for all-comers.**

**Saturday 12th February 2011.**

**Kensington Unitarian Church (Essex Church)** Nearest tube: Notting Hill Gate.  
112 Palace Gardens Terrace, London W8 4RT.

**The Rev Bill Darlison** will introduce sacraments and symbols that could breathe new life into our worship and rites of passage ceremonies, based on his ministry at Dublin Unitarian Church. The aim is that participants should feel empowered to begin using these in their own congregations.

### **Programme:**

12.30 pm – Arrivals and lunch (**please bring a packed lunch**, tea available).

1.30 pm – Workshop begins.

4.15 pm – Tea and departures.

(Organised by: London & SE District Liberal Christian Affinity Group. Further information: Jim Corrigan: 020 8361 1843).

# Why sacraments could save us

Drawing on his highly-successful ministry at Dublin Unitarian Church, **Bill Darlison** calls for a resurrection of symbolism in our worship and rites of passage ceremonies

‘As dreary as a Unitarian chapel on a wet Tuesday afternoon.’ I came across this arresting simile in *The Guardian* just after I became a Unitarian in 1988. I can’t remember the author or the context, but it amused and upset me in equal measure. I had just swapped a highly colourful and poetic religious tradition – Roman Catholicism – for a monochromatic, prosaic, wordy system, in which debate was raging about the appropriateness of lighting a candle at the beginning of worship.

‘Unitarians are symbolophobes’, said the late Rev Michael Joyce (who, like me, was brought up a Catholic) on our first meeting in October of 1992, and my subsequent experience of our movement has given me no cause to question Michael’s judgement. We are indeed symbolophobes – people who are uncomfortable with symbol and sacrament; we like to define and to argue, to remove all possibility of ambiguity. Ours is a religion of ideas, and the centrality of the pulpit in our churches emphasises the importance of the spoken word in our worship.

We boast that Unitarians don’t have to leave their intellects at the door of the church. Maybe not, but we seem to leave our imaginations there. We are suspicious of the imagination. Hence the dreariness of much of our worship, expressing what Emerson called ‘corpse cold Unitarianism’. Hence, I think, the empty churches. Hence the fact that the only people we seem to attract these days are those who have ‘issues’, and who can be troublesome, opinionated, argumentative and (often) intolerant. In the Harry Potter books such people are called ‘Muggles’ - prosaic, ‘non-magical’ people. In the old days they were called puritans, who, according to G.K. Chesterton, are people whose mind never takes a holiday, who think that they can only worship God with their head, and not with their hands and feet. I would suggest that they are also closet Docetists, followers of an ancient heresy which despised the physical world and the physical body.

It’s time to put some poetry and some ‘physicality’ back. It’s time to resurrect aspects of symbolic worship before our churches are turned into carpet warehouses and our people are accommodated by richer – and, at times, more liberal - traditions like Anglicanism. In short, we need to become sacramental, which means rediscovering how ordinary aspects of the created world – bread, water, oil, wine, candles and so on – can be vehicles which lead us, through the imagination, to the divine.

This must not be dismissed as creeping Romanism. What has become increasingly clear to me over the years is that these things are not the preserve of Rome. They are found throughout



Dublin Unitarian Church.  
**Photo: Paul Spain**

the religious traditions of the world, and Rome did not invent them, it inherited them. Virtually everything in the Catholic sacramental system can be traced to the Mystery religions of the ancient world, and in particular to Mithraism. In addition, sacramental or symbolic actions are found throughout the contemporary religions of the world. For example, many religions have some kind of symbolic food sharing as part of their worship; the Hindu tradition of *prasad*, in which food is offered to God at the beginning of worship and then eaten by the congregation at the end, bears more than a passing resemblance to the Christian Eucharist. A movement like ours, which tries to find links between the religions of the world, and which prides itself on its ecumenical outlook, would do well to look at those symbolic actions which are found everywhere, because the fact of their ubiquity might be telling us something very important about our human nature and our human needs.

What it tells us, I venture to suggest, is this: that we humans are natural symbol makers; we have a propensity towards the poetic, the metaphorical. We see the tangible as an expression of the intangible, the visible of the invisible, and we ascribe meanings to things and actions which transcend their ordinary prosaic description. So, for example, to say that Mr. A. shook hands with Mr. B. goes beyond the mere fact of touching limbs: it shows friendship, harmony, cooperation. Anyone who does not understand this and similar symbolic actions – people who are autistic have great difficulty with such things – find themselves on the fringes of ordinary human society, locked in a prosaic, literalist world, which can be severely debilitating. That we are natural creators and interpreters of metaphor is proved by the counterintuitive fact that the earliest literature in any civilisation is generally poetry. Writing does not begin with shopping lists, scientific descriptions, and philosophical treatises; it begins with rhythm, and metaphor, and story. Prose comes later. If we would re-acquaint ourselves with the wellsprings of our human creativity, we need to rediscover our instinctive appreciation for symbolism.

Sacraments say something very important about our attitude to the physical world; they tell us that the world is essentially good, and that objects within the world are expressions of the creative power of God. ‘Everything that lives is holy,’ says William Blake, and the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, tells us that every created thing, animate and inanimate, is an expression of God, and a poem about God. ‘If I understood even the simplest thing,’ he writes, ‘I would never need to write (or listen to!) another sermon.’ And St. Francis of Assisi, in the hymn *All Creatures of our God and King*, sees the whole of creation – sun, moon, earth, wind, water – singing its praise to God, an idea taken up by the great 20th century Jesuit mystic and geologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in his celebrated work *The Hymn of the Universe*.

In Dublin we have taken this seriously over the past decade or so. We have concentrated on developing rites of passage which consistently use sacramental elements. Our Welcoming Ceremony (Baptism) uses water, oil, a flower, and a ball carrying an image of the world – ‘which we are handing on to you, for you to play with and to care for’. We celebrate Communion with bread and wine on the fifth Sunday of every month which has five Sundays, the bread symbolising (inter alia) our common human needs, the wine ‘the gladness at the heart of life’. Our young people take part in a Coming of Age Ceremony, inspired by the Jewish Bar Mitzvah, on the nearest Sunday to their thirteenth birthday.

Having followed a year-long programme of preparation, the young person chooses the hymns, does a reading, and writes and reads a credo. This is a symbolic entry into adulthood, and has been very well received by parents and young people alike.

Anyone who regularly visits the sick and dying knows how impoverished our Unitarian traditions can seem. What does one *do*? Emerson, so the story is told, once commented on the colours of the medicine bottles! ‘Sir, if you don’t know your business, you’d better go home,’ said the dying man. But what else could he do? We need to develop bedside liturgies and sacraments (for those who want them) which express connection, love, thanksgiving. Anointing the dying person with oil – symbolically closing down and giving thanks for the senses which were symbolically opened and dedicated at baptism – is a profoundly beautiful act, expressing by simple human touch, the sanctity of the body. Our sister denomination, the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, like the Catholics, have a tradition of taking the communion elements to the sick – a lovely expression of community and solidarity. Couldn’t we British Unitarians devise something similar?

The Catholic Church has seven sacraments, and I see no reason why we can’t have just as many, or even more. For example, I would like us to have a sacrament which celebrates the third stage of life, which would be performed when a person attains the age of sixty, ‘the birthday of the soul’ according to some eastern traditions. I don’t know what it would be called (someone suggested ‘Silvering’), what form it would take, or what elements we would use, but I think it would help to ease the burden of ageing, by honouring it, and it would encourage and legitimise the sense of withdrawal and reflection which seems to come naturally to us at this time of life. It would also be an excuse for a party!

What about the dangers? ‘Surely it’s a short step from sacraments to magic,’ I hear you say. Indeed it is, but we should not avoid things simply because they can go wrong. If we adopted this attitude we would never get out of bed in the morning. We can avoid the drift into magic by constantly reminding ourselves that any ‘effects’ these sacraments may have (or seem to have) are purely psychological, and are not attempts to manipulate God in any way. In addition, we can minimise the magical element by ensuring that any sacraments we employ are conducted by as many suitably trained and willing members of the congregation as possible, so that their administration is not the preserve of some ‘special person’, an ordained minister. This is why the communion services in Dublin are always led by a member of the congregation these days, and not by the minister. And I would like to see more baptisms performed by members of the congregation: there is something touchingly appropriate about a service of welcome and thanksgiving performed by a parent or grandparent, an uncle or an aunt, and I would encourage more people to express this aspect of what the Bible calls ‘the priesthood of all believers’.

We are in a unique position among religious groups in that we have the freedom to devise ceremonies and to discard them. We have no bishops to please or to obey. We can accommodate our own needs. What these needs may be, and how we can best satisfy them, should be urgently discussed by the whole Unitarian movement, and especially by Unitarian Christians.

**The Rev Bill Darlison retired to his native Yorkshire in June, after 14 years as Minister of Dublin Unitarian Church. During his time in Dublin, church membership grew to more than 200 to become the largest Unitarian congregation in the British Isles.**

# UCA SUMMER MEETING AT GOLDERS GREEN

## ‘Unique’ communion service

History was made at Golders Green Unitarians in mid-July when a communion service was held at the north London church for the first time in more than three decades. The occasion was the Summer Meeting of the Unitarian Christian Association, where the Honorary President of Golders Green Unitarians (GGU), Jim Corrigan, led the opening service with communion.

“We were delighted to be able to celebrate a full communion service again at our church – the first time since 1976. While preparing for this event, and much to our surprise, we discovered the old GGU communion set at the back of one of our cupboards, and so were able to put it to good use once again,” said Jim.

The Minister of GGU, the Rev Feargus O’Connor, lit the chalice at the start of the service, and warmly welcomed the 30 or so attenders (from more than 10 congregations around London and the South of England).

The opening service was followed by a workshop led by the Unitarian Christian Association moderator, the Rev Jeff Gould, on ‘Bible Poverty’. Jeff explained how Unitarians had once been at the forefront of Biblical scholarship in Britain, and yet nowadays many of our congregations seldom if ever used the Bible. In fact though, he said, ‘Bible poverty’ is common to many denominations today.

Jeff tested those present with a series of quotations from different Biblical books, and much enjoyment was held discussing their origin and significance. Jeff also commented on how GGU is filled with Biblical imagery, and he pointed out and commented on the different features.

The last communion service at GGU, in 1976, was led by a visiting American Episcopalian woman priest, the Rev Alison Palmer. She had been told by the Church of England that she could not preside at any Anglican communion services while in the UK. So the then minister of GGU, the Rev Keith Gilley, invited her to preside at one at his church, which she did. The event generated national publicity, and was broadcast on the BBC.



*The Rev Jeff Gould leads discussions on Bible Poverty at Golders Green. (Photo: Bob Pounder).*

# Seeing Jesus through non-Roman eyes

Three manuscripts discovered in the past 100 years – from Taoist Christianity, Buddhism and the Gospel of Thomas – offer radically-new perspectives on early Christian life, writes **Ruth Rowntree**

Unitarians come from many different religious backgrounds and we each develop our own private spiritual path. So it is with some trepidation that I present to you a path that greatly interests me, but which does not seem to have had the exposure in Unitarian circles that I think it deserves.

When the 18th-century English Presbyterians studied the Bible, they had two main aims: ‘to reconcile Christian faith with the new scientific outlook of the times’, and to get back to ‘the religion of Christ in its original simplicity and natural beauty free from adulteration and mixture’.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays it is not only Unitarians who realise that Christianity has been distorted. Nor was it only the early church Fathers, from Paul to Thomas Aquinas, who reshaped the teachings of Jesus. It was also the culture of ancient Rome. The Romans demonised the Jews, with their monotheism, and other heretics (simply people who thought differently from them), and they belittled women; all these tendencies were contrary to the teachings of Jesus and still bedevil the world today.

So when looking for a truer account of Jesus’ teaching, it would be as well to find a source which had not been influenced by Rome. Luckily, during the past 100 years or so several ancient writings have come to light. Translated and published, they are readily available to the public. I have chosen three sources and three subjects to show how each source treats the same subject, so that a comparison may be made.

My first source, relating to seventh-century Chinese Taoist Christianity, is quoted in Martin Palmer’s book *The Jesus Sutras*, first published in 2001. These Sutras, or teachings, have been known for the last 100 years since they were discovered in remote NW China at Dunhuang, once a great town on the Silk Route, but now fallen into obscurity. At the end of the 19th century a Taoist priest broke into a room cut out of rocks and discovered a secret library which had been sealed up in about 1005 AD. Most of the scrolls contained Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist texts, relating to the great faiths of ancient China; but some were Christian books, written in Chinese, revealing a Chinese Christianity very different from that which has come to the West through Rome.



*The Nestorian Stele (or Stone) – a limestone monument erected in China in 781 CE, to commemorate 150 years of Christianity there, with a text in both Chinese and Syriac.*

Martin Palmer is a Chinese scholar and a theologian. To augment his own experience of translating Taoist texts, he gathered a team of specialists who could identify and interpret insights from Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese history. It seems that in the year 635 AD a group of monks from the west (probably Persian) entered China by prior arrangement and were given an official welcome. They settled in China, and their first Sutras were written between 640 and 660 AD. With one exception I have concentrated on these first teachings, because of their least degree of adaptation to Buddhist or Taoist viewpoints.

## **The Oneness of God**

My first subject is ‘the oneness of God’. The Chinese Taoist–Christian texts read as follows.

*‘People think there are two important things under Heaven. The first is God and the second is money. I say to you: seek just one thing. There is one sacred spirit who forgives all. Watch the birds; they do not plant or harvest and they have no houses to worry about. They do not work, yet are fed and watered and never worry about what to wear, because the One cares for them. You are more important than the birds, so why do you worry?’*

*‘The Messiah is not the Honoured One. Instead through his body he showed the people the Honoured One. He showed the holy transformation beyond all previous reckoning. What he brought was not from being human, but came direct from the Honoured One. He showed love to all around him, but the tempter tempts, and this causes problems. This is why the teachings were brought.’*

*‘Nobody has seen God. Nobody has the ability to see God. Truly God is like the wind. Who can see the wind? God is not still but moves over the earth at all times. He is everything and everywhere. Humanity lives only because it is filled with God’s life-giving breath. Peace comes only when you can rest secure in your own place, when your heart and mind rest in God. Day in, day out, there you rest in contentment, open to where you may be led. God leads the believer to that place of contentment and great bliss.’*

*‘God’s sacred spirit force allows him to be in one place, but where it is nobody knows, or how to get there. God is beyond the cycle of death and birth, beyond being called male or female. God made both Heaven and Earth. God’s sacred spirit force has never been fully manifested. This power can grant longevity and lead to immortality.’*

My second source is the first-century Gospel of Thomas, probably dictated within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus. The only known intact copy was found in a sealed earthenware jar buried in the sand at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. The following translated extracts are taken from *Jesus Untouched by the Church* by Hugh McGregor Ross, published in 1998. A Quaker, a scientist, and a self-taught theologian, he challenges some other translations of the Gospel to present a more precise meaning. By identifying certain concepts which were common in the Middle East 2000 years ago but little known to us

today, and by rearranging the order of the 114 sayings of Jesus to put like with like, his book is an invaluable guide to the inner meanings of the sayings.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus speaks to his hearers in the language and concepts of their own culture. To the Hebrews, he speaks of the Father and the Kingdom; to the Greeks he speaks of the One, the All, and the Light.

*Logion 67*            *Jesus said:*  
*He who understands the All*  
*but is lacking himself*  
*lacks everything.*

*Logion 76*            *Jesus said:*  
*The Kingdom of the Father is like a man, a merchant,*  
*who owned merchandise,*  
*and found a pearl.*  
*That merchant was wise:*  
*he sold the merchandise,*  
*he bought this one single pearl for himself.*  
*You also seek after the treasure*  
*which does not perish,*  
*which remains in the place*  
*where no moth comes to devour,*  
*and no worm destroys.*

*Logion 77*            *Jesus said:*  
*I am the light that is above them all.*  
*I am the All.*  
*The All comes forth from me.*  
*Cleave the wood, I am there;*  
*lift up the stone,*  
*and you shall find me there.*

(H. M. Ross comments that this statement is not pantheist, but finds 'the All' in the common place.)

My third source is even older, having been recorded by Buddhists from news brought by merchants along the trading routes of the Orient. It is presented in two books: *The Unknown Life of Jesus* (American version published in 1890) and *The Unknown Life of Christ* (English version published in 1895) by Nicolas Notovitch, a journalist of Russian Jewish extraction who converted to Greek Orthodox Christianity. In 1887 he was travelling in north-west India, recording observations on its peoples and their way of life, when he learned that in some Buddhist monasteries there were ancient manuscripts concerning the travels and teaching of Jesus, whom they called Issa. After the crucifixion, shocked that a man of God should have been put to death, the Buddhists went through their records and collected together all texts that had a bearing on Jesus. But they left them still in their original form of disconnected fragments. It was Notovitch who rearranged them in consecutive order to make sense of them. I have used the American version, because its modern reprint makes it easier to obtain.

On Oneness, they read:

*Chapter V*

- 12 *One law has been given to man to guide him in his actions. Fear the Lord thy God; bend thy knees only before Him and bring to Him only the offerings which come from thy earnings.*
- 15 *The Eternal Judge, the eternal spirit, constitutes the only and indivisible soul of the universe, and it is this soul alone which creates, contains and vivifies all.*
- 16 *He alone has willed and created. He alone has existed from eternity, and his existence will be without end; there is no one like unto Him either in the heavens or on the earth.*
- 18 *He willed and the earth was. By one divine thought he reunited the waters and separated them from the dry land of the globe. He is the cause of the mysterious life of man, into whom He has breathed part of His divine Being.*

*Chapter VIII*

- 17 *To the Zoroastrians Jesus said:  
The eternal spirit is the soul of everything animate, and you commit a great sin in dividing Him into the spirit of Evil and the spirit of Good, for there is no God other than the God of Good.*

**Women**

My second subject is 'Women'. Again to start with the Jesus Sutras:

Chapter 5

*Some women followers obeying the law, came to where the tomb was. A number of Jews also came at dawn on the third day to the same place. It shone with bright light and the Messiah had gone. The women went to tell all his other students what they had witnessed. As the first woman caused the lies of humanity, so it was women who first told the truth about what had happened, to show all that the Messiah forgave women and wished them to be treated properly in future, for he appeared and confirmed all they had said.*

The Gospel of Thomas takes a different line:

*Logion 114 Simon Peter said to them:  
Let Mary go out from amongst us,  
because women are not worthy of life.  
Jesus said:  
Behold, I will guide her Being,  
in order that I make her male  
that she, like you, shall become a living spirit.  
For every person who transcends being woman or man  
shall enter the Kingdom of the heavens.*

Notovitch's Buddhist records state:

*Chapter XII*

- 8 *Upon this an old woman who had approached the group, to better hear Issa, was pushed aside by one of the disguised men, who placed himself before her.*
- 9 *Then said Issa: It is not good for a son to push away his mother, that he may occupy the place that belongs to her. Whoso doth not respect his mother – the most sacred being after his God – is unworthy of the name of son.*
- 10 *Harken to what I say to you: Respect woman, for in her we see the mother of the universe, and all the truth of divine creation is to come through her.*
- 11 *She is the fount of everything good and beautiful, as she is also the germ of life and death. Upon her man depends in all his existence, for she is his moral and natural support in his labours.*
- 12 *In pain and suffering she brings you forth; in the sweat of her brow she watches over your growth, and until her death you cause her greatest anxieties. Bless her and adore her, for she is your only friend and support on earth.*
- 13 *Respect her; defend her. In so doing you will gain for yourself her love; you will find favour before God, and for her sake many sins will be remitted to you.*
- 14 *Love your wives and respect them, for they will be the mothers of tomorrow and later the grandmothers of a whole nation.*
- 15 *Be submissive to the wife; her love ennobles man, softens his hardened heart, tames the wild beast in him and changes it to a lamb.*
- 16 *Wife and mother are the priceless treasures which God has given you. They are the most beautiful ornaments of the universe, and from them will be born all who will inhabit the world.*
- 17 *Even as the Lord of Hosts separated the light from the darkness, and the dry land from the waters, so does woman possess the divine gift of calling forth out of man's evil nature all the good that is in him.*
- 18 *Therefore, I say unto you, after God, to women must belong your best thoughts, for she is the divine temple where you will most easily obtain perfect happiness.*
- 19 *Draw forth from this temple your moral force. There you will forget your sorrows and your failures, and recover the love necessary to aid your fellow men.*
- 20 *Suffer her not to be humiliated, for by humiliating her you humiliate yourselves, and lose the sentiment of love, without which nothing can exist on earth.*
- 21 *Protect your wife, that she may protect you – you and all your household. All that you do for your mothers, your wives, for a widow, or for any other woman in distress, you will do for your God.*

**Original nature, or innate nature**

The third subject is 'Original nature, or innate nature' (not original sin). According to Martin Palmer, 'St. Augustine (AD354 – 430) saw humanity as almost irredeemably

wicked and perverse, rejecting any idea of some innate goodness. To him, salvation is an entirely undeserved act of grace that plucks us from our filthy state of evil. Augustine was opposed in his time by the first British theologian on record, a monk named Pelagius, who argued the opposite, that human nature was basically good but had been corrupted and misguided by human weakness.’ Unfortunately, Pelagius was overruled by the early Church.

According to the Gospel of Thomas:

*Logion 14*      *Jesus said to them:  
If you fast you will beget a sin to yourselves,  
and if you pray you will be condemned,  
and if you give alms  
you will do harm to your spirits...*

*Logion 104*     *In response to the disciples’ talk of praying and fasting, Jesus says:  
What therefore is the sin that I have committed  
or in what have I been overcome?*

Hugh Ross observes<sup>2</sup> that the word ‘sin’ comes from the idea of missing the mark – or failing to observe the requirements of established religion. At any rate, little significance is placed on the word.

The Jesus Sutras of China see matters from a very different angle, as we see in the following extract from ‘The Sutra of Returning to your Original Nature’.

### *Chapter 6*

*‘All of you should chant this day and night.*

*Because it brings back clear seeing and each of you will return to your own original nature, your ultimately true beingness free from all falsehood and illusion. And you will see these teachings are inexhaustible.’*

*Then the crowd sang praises, wanting more, but the Messiah said:*

*‘It is enough now – even though we cannot stop the Word. It is like a good well which never runs dry. When you’ve been saved from your sickness in body and soul, there’s no need to go on drinking. So it is with my teaching, which is only the beginning of you touching your own true original nature. Too much would not be right.’*

Notovich’s Buddhist records are our final example of teachings about original nature:

### *Chapter VI*

6      *‘He who has recovered his primitive purity shall die with his transgressions forgiven and have the right to contemplate the majesty of God.’*

## Chapter VII

- 18 *'That you may attain supreme bliss ye must not only purify yourselves, but must also guide others into the path that will enable them to regain their primitive innocence.'*

## Chapter IX

- 14 *'For God has created you in His own image, innocent with pure souls and hearts filled with kindness and not made for the planning of evil, but to be the sanctuaries of love and justice.*

- 15 *Therefore, I say unto you, soil not your hearts with evil, for in them the Eternal Being abides.*

- 16 *When you do works of devotion and love, let them be with full hearts, and see that the motives of your actions be not hopes of gain or self-interest.*

- 17 *For actions so impelled will not bring you nearer to salvation, but lead to a state of moral degradation wherein theft, lying and murder pass for generous deeds.'*

*The Oneness of God and the equality of the sexes are both long-standing Unitarian beliefs. Although we have rejected the doctrine of original sin, we have never embraced the ideal of recovering our primitive purity. Perhaps we should. If we did, we could say with Martin Palmer, 'In a post-Augustinian Christian world, this rediscovery, embodied in the actual books and thoughts of a major ancient Church, may well be a version of Christianity that can speak to spiritual seekers today.'*

### Notes:

- 1) The Unitarians by Jeremy and Rosemary Goring (Religious and Moral Education Press, 1984).
- 2) Jesus Untouched by the Church: His Teachings in the Gospel of Thomas, edited by Hugh Ross (William Sessions, 1998).
- 3) Thirty Essays on the Gospel of Thomas by Hugh Ross (fourth edition, Cathair na Mart: Evertype, 2008).

**Ruth Rowntree is a member of Oat Street Chapel, Evesham, and author of 'Religious Devils of Hampstead'.**



***The Unitarian Christian Association aims to provide a place where liberal Christianity can be explored within our General Assembly. Have you considered joining us?***

*Details for how to join are to be found inside the back cover of this edition.*

# Awakening the heart's core

The Gospel of Thomas is often seen as a (Gnostic) renunciation of the world – but **Tom McCready** finds it contains new insights into the self and our relation with the world

The Gospel of Thomas is utterly unlike any other gospel. There is no narrative, no birth in a stable, no crucifixion, and no resurrection. It is a collection of sayings that are presented to us as the words of Jesus, not second-hand reports or stories about Jesus. The opening lines declare: ‘These are the words that the living Jesus spoke’ – words that purport to come directly from witnesses who claim to have been in Jesus’ presence and heard him speak.

The sayings are profoundly poetic, lyrical, and insightful, if, at times, difficult and intensely metaphysical, and many of them also appear in the official canonical gospels. Is it possible that the Gospel of Thomas actually contains the authentic words of Jesus? A consensus of modern scholarship would regard such a claim to be as convincing as that made for any of the canonical gospels, and would probably date Thomas ten years earlier than Mark, the earliest of the canonical gospels. The scholars of the Jesus Seminar, for instance, consider the Gospel of Thomas to contain a significantly higher proportion of the authentic words of Jesus than does the Gospel of John.

In 1945 a whole library of ancient texts was found in a cave in the desert at Nag Hammadi, among them a complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas in Coptic. The discovery enabled scholars to examine a text that has been untouched for at least 1700 years: a text produced by the early followers of Jesus and very probably from the direct recollections of those who knew him, witnesses who walked the hills and roads of Galilee with him; a text that has not been distorted or compromised by 2000 years of church politics.

It is an ancient text with an astonishingly fresh perspective. It sits well with ideas of current philosophy and sociology on consciousness and identity, on the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman). It also resonates with the wisdom of other ancient cultures. The Zen masters in particular would have recognised the voice of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas as using a spiritual language and methodology very similar to their own.

One of the most famous sayings of Huinén (638-718 CE), the influential sixth patriarch of Chán Buddhism, was: ‘Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born.’ Compare this with saying 84 from the Gospel, which attributes the following statement to Jesus: ‘*When you see your likeness, you are happy. But when you see your images that came into being before you and that neither die nor become visible, how much will you bear!*’ The finest of the modern scholars of the Gospel of Thomas, Richard Valantasis, says of this verse: ‘This saying describes the burden and wonder of the seeker awakening to the immortal, pre-existent, and invisible part of their lives.’ A more trenchant description of the aim of Zen practice, i.e., the awakening of spontaneous spiritual illumination, would be difficult to find.

The main difficulty presented to a contemporary audience in reading the Gospel of Thomas is that the only intact copy that we have comes to us from the Nag Hammadi hoard, and it is almost universally agreed among scholars that this was the library of a Gnostic community. Gnosticism is a strongly dualistic tradition which distinguishes the spiritual and material realms, attributes ‘good’ only to the spiritual, and sees everything material, including human appetites, as inevitably corrupt. There is a tension between the dualism of Gnosticism and the profoundly non-dualistic vision of human wholeness present in the sayings of Jesus in The Gospel of Thomas.



*The original codices found at Nag Hammadi, which contained the Gospel of Thomas.*

In some passages Jesus explicitly denies dualism. In saying 72, he states ‘I am not a divider’ and in saying 61: ‘*Whoever is united will be filled with light, but whoever is divided will be filled with darkness*’. To describe the Gospel of Thomas simply as a Gnostic gospel is to overlook the harsh dualism of Gnosticism, or to over-romanticise it to fit a modern context.

The respected liberal-friendly scholar, John Dominic Crossan, has described The Gospel of Thomas as a gospel of ‘Celibate Asceticism’. Although, in an age of gross indulgence, the ideal of asceticism has some very attractive qualities, are we to believe that we can experience neither spiritual fulfillment nor simple human happiness unless we are celibate? Or that the voice of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is aimed only at those who have forsaken family life and all other forms of intimate human companionship?

There are problems with this: for one thing, it would mean a Jesus who is completely out of step with the general culture and philosophy of the Judaism of his times. It ignores the fact that celibacy in those times was more a requirement of a spiritual retreat (even, arguably, among the Essenes) than a lifetime commitment.

It would also put Jesus at odds with Martin Buber, one of the finest modern Jewish thinkers, who has written: ‘Real relationships with God cannot be achieved if real relationships to the world and to mankind are lacking’. However, if sexuality is no obstacle to spirituality, this does not mean that there are no moral restraints upon sexual conduct. The sadly neglected modern philosopher John MacMurray has some very helpful material on this point in *Reason and Emotion*, where he offers a lucid definition of chastity as emotional responsibility within sexual relations, rather than an abstention from sexual relations.

Although we are living in very different times from those in which the Thomas sayings originate, if we can resolve these tensions sufficiently to move forward and ask ‘What

does the Gospel of Thomas have to say to us today?', we might get a very illuminating answer. Valantasis again: 'These sayings guide their readers and hearers into being different kinds of people, or at least, they suggest that a different way of living exists and should be attempted. The alternative experience of self and world posited in these sayings aim towards the construction of an alternative way of understanding self and of living in the world; they point towards a transformation of identity and call us to the unity of self that fulfils. To a new understanding of self and relationship to others.'

To this extent the Gospel of Thomas is a Gnostic Gospel; but for Gnosticism to make sense in modern times it would have to divest itself of its harsh dualism, and a Gnosticism redefined to exclude dualism would not be Gnosticism, it would be something else. Whether we call it Gnosticism or something new, it must be done if we are to see, read, and hear the Gospel of Thomas for what it truly is. Which is not only a call to transcendence, but a declaration that transcendence is immediately accessible. Saying 94: '*One who seeks will find, for one who knocks it will be opened.*' The requirements for transcendence are not dependent upon training or status, but upon willingness to connect with the inner light and life that is common to all human persons. Saying 70: '*If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you.*'

To this extent the Gospel of Thomas is an ascetic Gospel, since the achievement of the spiritual fulfillment that it promises does require an act of renunciation; but this is one point where a modern understanding of self and selfhood renders the reality of ascetic renunciation more accessible and acceptable. It is not and does not require a rigid and unforgiving rejection of the world; what Jesus advocates in the Gospel of Thomas is not so much a renunciation of the world, of human appetites and human comforts, but the renunciation of an aggressive and acquisitive attitude towards the world, and of a sense of identity that is based upon acquired status. Jesus encourages his followers to renounce wealth and comfort not because there is anything inherently unhealthy or immoral in them, but because a sense of identity and of personal worth that is based upon the acquisition of status is the essential illusion that keeps us from realising the more fully integrated, authentic sense of self that Jesus points towards.

It is pride of position and pride of possession that are the delusions that keep us from attaining the serenity of spirit that God intends for us. Jesus, in the Gospel of Thomas and elsewhere, is quite clear that the poor are one step nearer to realising this than the rich are, but that this is simply because they have much less that they must leave behind in order to get there, and that envy of position and possession is every bit as damaging a delusion as pride of possession and position.

What then is this state of grace and serenity that Jesus is urging on his hearers; and on us, who can catch the echoes of his words down two thousand years of history? What is Jesus referring to in saying 24? 'His disciples said: "*Show us the place where you are, for we must seek it.*" He said to them "*Whosoever has ears to hear let him hear. There is light within a man of light and it illuminates the whole world. When it does not shine, there is darkness*"' And in saying 77? 'Jesus said: "*I am the light that is over all things. I am all: From me has come forth, and to me all has reached. Split a piece of wood, I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.*"' Jesus is quite clear: it is the Kingdom of God;

or, as the most recent and more accurate translations put it: God's imperial kingdom.

Another aspect of modern thinking which makes this more explicable and accessible is that we no longer think of identity as ascribed by a person's status or position in life: it is something attained by a person's actions, attitudes, and achievements in life. Identity is flexible and changeable, and an adjustment of identity therefore requires much less emotional upheaval than it did with previous models of the self.

There has been much scepticism on the subject of post-modernism, and a reasonable case could be made that whatever insights about the structure of human identity and the organisation of human society the post-modernists have to offer us, the sociologists of the 1960s, such as Peter Berger and Robert Bellah, were there before them, and with much less self-important fanfare. However, if the post-modernists and the sociologists between them have added one undeniable useful truth to the sum of human knowledge, it is surely this: that there is nothing that is biologically determined or divinely ordained in the relations of cultural reproduction. There is nothing either handed down from on high by divine fiat or wired into our biology by genetic command in the way that we define ourselves; either in the norms and values that define whole societies or in the actions and attitudes that define individuals. They are neither assumed nor imposed: they are negotiated. They are the result of our collective symbolic interactions.

The self, to put it simply, is not a solid object, it is a set of relations. And those relations are negotiable. And to renegotiate the set of relations that constitute the individual self is a far less scary proposition than its extinction. Thus modern thinking on identity can shed a simplifying light on the mystery of religious experience that is in line with Martin Buber's critique of mysticism, where he argues that notions of ego-death or higher self, mystical absorption, or being 'born again' are purely symbolic, and that religious experience produces no real change in the *substance* of the self, only in its shape. I prefer to express this in simpler terms and say that the experience of transcendence does not produce a dramatic change in the nature or structure of consciousness: it produces a simple shift in the centre of gravity of consciousness, albeit with dramatically liberating and illuminating results. To put it even more simply, it is what happens when our selfish fears and desires and all the woes and worries with which we defend them, are no longer the centre of our being, but its circumference.

What then is the centre of our being, the holy core of the heart, the selfless centre of the self? The best account I have encountered comes neither from Holy Scripture nor from any esoteric text: I found it in a recommended textbook for the course in contextual theology at the Partnership for Theological Education at Luther King House, Manchester:

*There is a mysterious centre to our being, hard to describe or discuss, yet indispensable to our integrity. It goes beyond the glorification of 'self-realization' and 'self-discovery': on the one hand it expresses the determination of the individual to be themselves; and yet, when we seek for that which gives harmony and wholeness to the individual self, we find the transcendence of individuality. To be truly myself I must recognize that which is greater than me, yet which does not negate me. In losing myself, I*

*find myself. In ceasing to take anxious pride in my individuality, I find a wholeness I never realized I possessed. ... It is the courage of integrity, of an inner wholeness, of a oneness with God and with humanity and of a constant, invincible love.*

(Alistair V. Campbell, Rediscovering Pastoral Care)

*'Whosoever has ears to hear let him hear. There is light within a man of light and it illuminates the whole world.'* (Jesus of Nazareth, 'The Gospel of Thomas')

Note:

The Gospel of Thomas, by Richard Valantasis, was published in 1997 by Routledge in a series called 'New Testament Readings'. Also essential is The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus by the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, only available in an American edition, but easily found on Amazon.

**The Rev Tom McCready's last full-time ministry was at Hull Unitarian Church.**



## **A TASTE OF TAIZÉ – a workshop for all-comers.**

**Saturday 20th November 2010.**

**Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel**, 3 Pilgrims Place, Hampstead, London NW3 1NG.  
**Nearest tube:** Hampstead.

A gentle introduction to the ethos of the ecumenical community in Burgundy, whose style of worship has influenced congregations around the world – led by the **Rev Jeff Gould** (UCA Moderator) and **Mrs Catherine Fozard** (UCA Treasurer). Chants will be learned, and the day will end with a complete service. Participants will be equipped to lead Taizé worship in their own congregations.

### **Programme:**

- 11 am -- Arrivals and coffee/tea
- 11.30 am -- Introduction to and exploration of Taizé worship
- 1 pm -- Lunch (**please bring a packed lunch**)
- 2 pm -- Further work and celebration of a complete service
- 3.30 pm Tea and departures

(Organised by: London & SE District Liberal Christian Affinity Group. Further information: Jim Corrigan: 020 8361 1843).

# Dreams – and the Good Samaritan

In a recent sermon, **Linda Hart** explores how dreams and Gospel parables can disturb easy assumptions about ourselves

Several years ago, I had the pleasure of spending time with a Unitarian Universalist colleague, Jeremy Taylor. Jeremy is known best for the work he does with dreams. Artistic and well-centred, down to earth and funny, he led a group of us through several days of dreamwork, as he calls it.

It all starts by cultivating the capacity to remember your dreams. Keep a journal next to your bed, he suggests. Scrawl down as best you can what you remember of your dreams. Write down as much as you can. Later, when you are more awake, you can read over it, seek to reconstruct as much as you can of what happened in your dream. And after a while, he told us all, you'll get a sense of what the dreams mean, and how it is that they relate to your waking life. Even without having a dream journal, though, we were able to begin to look at our unconscious life through examining our dreams.

Working with a few people who were willing to tell their dreams in public, he led us through a process of looking at the dream through different eyes. We didn't do this by classical interpretation. There were no fast rules about what meant what. And the only person who could tell us what the dream really meant was the person who had the dream. He schooled us in saying, 'if this were my dream....' and then offering the meaning we perceived in it. The dreamer could then try it out for size, see how it fitted with her or his own perceptions, and explore what this particular analysis might mean.

As Jeremy talked with each one who shared a dream, he asked them to shift around in the roles. 'What if you were the dog in the dream?' he might ask. 'How does it feel to be there? How does that change the meaning for you?' His belief – and it seems right to me – is that the dreamer is playing all the parts in the dream: the dog and the racoon it's chasing as well as himself standing there shouting, or maybe she is the flying horse she's sitting on, too. The dreamer can take the conscious part of the landscape even, becoming the grass – or your favourite tree.

The point of it all, he kept telling us, was to discover ourselves. What we loved and hated, what hidden hurts and losses were crippling us, dreams could point us toward where we didn't even know we



*'The Parable of the Good Samaritan' by Jan Wijnants (1670), shows the good Samaritan tending the injured man.*

were blinded to something that was true and right. Looking at our dreams was a way that we could learn about what our lives were centred upon, what drove us.

The point of it all: discovery that enables more conscious, intentional living. And the way we get there is to look at it with new eyes.

When I finally began to study the Bible in my second year of college, I was quite startled to meet a different Jesus from the one that I had heard about through the broader culture. This Jesus wasn't talking only about salvation and believing in him. He wasn't sending people to hell. The thing about this Jesus was that he was telling stories that forced people into looking at the world a different way.

Actually, I didn't figure that bit out until a bit later. The stories were usually presented as a sort of fable, a tale that had a moral lesson at the end. Like the collection of stories from Aesop, the parables were presented as if they were this sort of allegorical creation. Like the tortoise and the hare, these Bible stories had a plain and simple meaning.

Except that not all of them did. And even the ones that did seem plain in their meaning became less clear as one looked at the context in which they were told. Parables are the stories, like dreams, that can help us look at the world with new eyes. They can open us to new meaning in the world so long as we allow them to be as dangerous as they truly are.

John Dominic Crossan is one of the foremost Biblical scholars, and he suggests that parables have a particular function in the world of stories. Myths, he tells us create worlds. Rather than taking that word in its common form – that of a fundamentally untrue story – he understands myth as the stories that we each tell about how the world is constructed. If we take, for example, the stories in Genesis, we have a myth about the world: that it was created and deemed good, that we were all created out of the dust of the earth, and live because of a breath, pneuma, spirit that was placed in us. That formational understanding will determine much about how we treat the earth and ourselves and each other.

Parables, on the other hand, seek to subvert the world that we expect. They challenge our usual perceptions and ask us to look at the world differently. They are not simple moral tales, and in the case of the teachings of Jesus, they are attempts to shake people out of their usual perceptions and make them – make us – look with new eyes.

Surely the story of the good Samaritan is one of the fables, pure and simple. And indeed at first glance that's what it appears to be. But the story is not nearly so simple, and seen in the right light, should challenge us and our view of the world. You know the story, no doubt. A traveller is set upon by thieves on a lonely road, beaten and robbed. The traveller is left by the side of the road. A Levite – a temple assistant -- comes by and refuses to stop. A priest comes along the road and refuses to stop. Finally, a man from Samaria stops and tends to the traveller, puts him on his donkey and transports him to an inn where he pays for the injured man to be tended until he is well enough to travel again, leaving money and promising more.

It is easy to make the two who went past into stick figures. In our day, with news of paedophile priests and all sorts of abuses in the church making headlines, we are wise to the flaws of clergy, and those who are charged with high moral living. We easily dismiss these characters, identifying ourselves with the traveller, perhaps, and certainly with the Samaritan.

Those who might have heard this story told in the time of Jesus, however, would have had no such cynicism. Priests and Levites were, well, us. They were not uncaring, nor ethically stupid. Not the hypocritical, too-high-and-mighty upper class of the world, but plain old people trying to make the best choice they could. Fred Craddock describes their dilemma this way:

*While their behaviour was certainly not commendable, neither was it without reason. The body on the roadside could have been a plant by robbers to trap a traveller. And certainly contact with a corpse would have defiled the priest and the Levite and disqualified them from their temple responsibilities. When they saw the victim, theirs was a choice between duty and duty.*

In other words, the Priest and the Levite were us. In the parables, as in our dreams, we have to try on all the parts to learn what it means. We are the ones who have walked past the hurt and bleeding, are we not? We are the ones who have carried on without stopping to help, are we not? And not because we are cold, but because we have been called to other duties, other responsibilities that are important and worthy. I've always said that the truly difficult choice is never between good and evil, but between good and good that draw us in different ways. These two people had important duties to God, tasks that were necessary for keeping good order in the world and without their loving attention, chaos might well erupt. They chose to be true to their duty, to keep the world whole by the works that they could not do if they touched that body by the side of the road. This would have been well understood by the people of the time of Jesus.

It is equally easy to bring the good Samaritan into our day and paint him with the easy brush of the unloved and unclean of our time. It is too easy to make the Samaritan into another stick figure, no flesh, no real bones, just the bare wisp of an outline of who he is. Name any kind of person who we automatically think of as 'them' and set that person there in the role. Indeed it asks us to subvert our perception of that kind of person, and offers us a truth: they too are like us and share in the care of the world, care for others. They have hearts that open in compassion and sympathy at least at moments. Caring not about the possible danger, caring not about becoming ritually unclean (for indeed they are already unclean by all the usual standards), someone who is such an outsider can become a hero, can be just another person, and perform good works. This parable, even taken as a simple moral tale, can make us look with new eyes about who our neighbour truly is.

But there is more to consider here. Our easy identification of ourselves with the Samaritan is not without its problems. Of course we would be the one who would stop, tend the wounded, be willing to give of our resources and our care to one who was so badly injured.

But there's another truth there, too, telling us something about ourselves: do we think of ourselves as the reviled, the unclean, the heretics? Well, that last one we may well think of as a way to describe ourselves. Are we the outcast?

The role of the parable is to subvert our usual expectations about the world, to shatter our assumptions about the world, about ourselves, in the hope that a different sort of light may break through. That we will look again: at ourselves, at the world, at the people who inhabit this space with us.

The truth is that we all need to have our world shaken up every now and again, to break us loose from our expectations and our outworn assumptions. To let us come with, as the Buddhists say, the mind of a beginner once more. Each time the world opens to us by being seen in a different light, we are reminded – if we are paying attention – that this world and the people who live in it with us are endlessly various, endlessly mysterious, endlessly beautiful and lost and broken and glorious and flawed and perfect all at once.

May it be that we are blessed with the moments when the world opens, and with the attention that allows us to see it, to step into it with grace and love.

**The Rev Linda Hart has been minister at Richmond and Putney Unitarian Church in London since 2007. Before that, she held several ministries in her native United States.**



## Poem at the GA, 2010

*By Brinley Price*

Half-captured by Christ's power of powerlessness,  
I face the mounting forces of the Beast;  
Half being of their number, cannot bless,  
Still fear to be my most by being least.  
The new man sprouts, a seedling soft but quick;  
The old man grips me fast in frozen soil.  
While from love's fire is lit my candle wick,  
In cold blasts of my past its flame must toil.

O may the Sun of Grace beat down and thaw  
The ice and free my spirit so it grows  
Obediently towards the Light, the Law  
Of being and the Well from which all flows.  
And may the outer doors be closed to sin,  
That each may feel Love's blazing hearth within.

**Brinley Price is a member of York Unitarians. He joined the UCA early this year.**

# What do Unitarians believe?

**Jim Corrigan** looks at the changing nature of Unitarian belief, in a recent sermon to the Oxford Chapel Society

I've had several surprises since I first got to know our Unitarian faith seven years ago. Early on, I met the Rev Ian Brown at an event at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian chapel in Hampstead. He told me he was an Anglican priest 'in good standing', but was also a member at Rosslyn Hill chapel and had been on its management committee for several years. 'Oh', I said, 'so you've become a Unitarian, a believer in One God rather than the Trinity of traditional Christianity?'

'Oh no', he said, 'I'm a Trinitarian. I just can't stand the politics in the Anglican church.' I was a bit confused by this – and even more so when he went on to say he didn't actually believe in God anyway!

'So tell me about this Trinitarian God you don't believe in?' Well, he replied, he didn't believe in a God 'out there', but rather in God as 'the ground of our being'. He went on to say he found the Trinity a very powerful metaphor for how one encounters the Divine – God the Father (the transcendent); the Holy Spirit (the immanent) and the Son (the human dimension). I was an agnostic and a seeker then, but I recall being most struck by his words.

Well, this movement of ours was nothing if not interesting. It showed the breadth of our denomination, where we have members from different faiths and of no faith. But this meeting with the Rev Ian Brown also helped me understand later when someone explained why the words 'Free Christian' are in our name – our full title is after all 'the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches'. I began to understand how one could be a Trinitarian and a member of our denomination. But I want to return to the Free Christian part of our name later.

First, let us look at where the name 'Unitarian' comes from, what it meant in the past and what it means today. In short, what do Unitarians believe?

Well originally Unitarians were Christians who believed that God was One, they believed in the Unity of the Godhead and not in the Trinity of traditional Christianity ('God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, three in one and one in three'). The idea of God as three equal 'persons' was first adopted by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and has been the central Christian doctrine ever since. Fierce arguments preceded its adoption, with one early churchman, Arius, putting forward the belief that Jesus could not be fully divine as God was. In a sense, the Arians, who lost the argument at Nicaea and were branded heretics, could be called forerunners of Unitarianism, but our denomination in fact traces its origins to the Reformation.

This revolt in 16th Century Europe started as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church – it was begun by Martin Luther in 1517, almost 500 years ago. The movement

for reform led in time to the establishment of independent Protestant churches across Europe.

The ideas that inspired the Reformation originated in the great cultural Renaissance in Europe -- particularly the belief in freedom. The reformers believed everyone should be free to read the Bible, not just priests and scholars, and these reformers translated the Bible into the vernacular languages of Europe. They believed in the power of human Reason and individual conscience.

As more people began to study the Bible, the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity was questioned, and anti-Trinitarian and Unitarian currents arose amid the intellectual ferment of the Reformation, beginning with Faustus Socinus, Francis David and Michael Servetus in Europe, and later in England with John Biddle. In England, as elsewhere in Europe, early Unitarians were persecuted – John Biddle was imprisoned many times for his views.

In England, anti-Trinitarian ideas began to circulate – very gradually -- after the Great Ejection of 1662, when up to 2,000 ministers lost their posts in the Established Church following the Act of Uniformity of 1662 – after they refused to subscribe to all 39 Articles of faith and the entire contents of the Book of Common Prayer. But it was to be more than 100 years later, in 1774, when the first avowedly Unitarian chapel was opened in England – at Essex Street, just off the Strand in London, the site of our present-day Unitarian headquarters.

It was founded by Theophilus Lindsey, an Anglican priest who'd broken away from the Church two years earlier after an unsuccessful attempt by liberal clergymen to relax the Articles of faith. Another prominent Unitarian of this time was the scientist, Joseph Priestley, who worked with Lindsey and developed a Unitarian theology, which laid out the basic Unitarian positions – that God is One and that Jesus was not Divine like God.

They based their beliefs on the Bible, while stressing that everyone should be free to develop their own understanding of it through Reason, in the light of conscience. Priestley believed where reason and faith contradict each other, reason should prevail. The watchwords of these 18th Century Rational Dissenters were Reason, Freedom and Tolerance. They embraced the advances of Science, and this stood the Unitarians in good stead through the nineteenth century, when traditional Christianity felt threatened by Science.

Other central elements of Unitarian belief took shape. These included a rejection of the traditional Christian concept of Original Sin, and instead a conviction that men and women had an inherent capacity for good. The capacity for good and evil resided in each person, and each had the freedom to choose. Unitarians tended to be optimistic about human nature, believing that with education, people could be encouraged to act rationally and humanely. Unitarians also rejected the Christian doctrine of Atonement, at least in its 'substitutionary' form – the idea that God sent Jesus to Earth to 'pay the price' for humanity's sins.

Our denomination's belief in human goodness was linked to the developing Unitarian view that Jesus was simply a man, but a man who realised to the fullest extent the Divinity

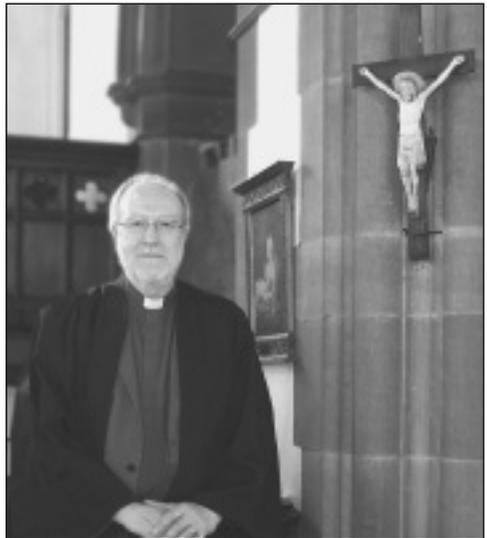
that is in all of us. Not all Unitarians at this time saw Jesus purely as a Man, but this view became more prevalent within our denomination through the 19th century.

However, 19th century Britain was to see many other changes within Unitarian thought. The central figure here was James Martineau, whose influence is still felt today. Martineau was affected by the Romantic movement of the early 1800s, with its emphasis on the emotions and intuition – and also by the American transcendentalists, who saw the Divine in Nature and all around us.

Martineau became critical of the pre-eminence given to Reason by Lindsey and Priestley. Very briefly, he argued for a ‘warmer religion’ – a religion of the heart. He proposed that moral intuition, rather than Reason or Scripture, should be seen as the primary source of religious knowledge. Under the influence of Martineau, Unitarians began to put their energies into developing a ‘moral religion’ – based on an intuitive understanding of the divine, concerned with values.

In fact, a gradual move away from Christianity to a broader theism can be seen in the late 19th Century. This move was accelerated by another important Unitarian figure, J. Estlin Carpenter. In 1878, he began a series of lectures on other religions, especially those of the East – at a time when this was almost unheard of in Britain. Thus the seeds were sown for understanding that Christ was not a unique revelation, and that other revelations (and other religions) could be equally valid.

Another important aspect of Martineau’s thought was his insistence that while the Unitarian name might be valid for individuals to use to describe their own theology, it should **not** be adopted as the collective name for our chapels or for our denomination. This, he said, would be too limiting. He advocated instead the name ‘Free Christian’, arguing that this would allow a much wider number to identify with us. The Free Christian tradition is an *inclusive* one, it says you can be Unitarian or Trinitarian (or neither) – your beliefs are matters of private judgement. And Martineau helped set up – separate from the British and Foreign Unitarian Association -- a National Conference of Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing or Kindred Congregations. This National Conference only merged with the Unitarian Association in 1928, at the formation of our General Assembly.



*The current Minister of Flowery Field Church at Hyde, Manchester, the Rev Eric Breeze, next to the crucifix above the pulpit. Flowery Field has remained true to its founding principles as a non-denominational Free Christian church, open to all.*

But in order to remain true to Martineau's challenge, 'Free Christian' was incorporated into our name, and we remain today the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. This helps explain why Trinitarians can be part of our denomination. Why? Because our essence is that we are non-subscribers *in principle* – we impose no creeds – rather than that we have any collective theological position on the nature of the Divine.

Linked to Martineau's concept of a broad church is the idea that we were the 'church universal' – an open faith. The 19th Century Unitarian and Free Christian movement was both creedless and **open**, with no special tests of faith needed before becoming a member.

Looking at the influence of Martineau and Carpenter, we can see how the multi-faith diversity of our movement today developed. This diversity of belief is to be welcomed and celebrated – it is our unique quality and our strength. This – and the fact that we keep changing – are among the few constants of our faith.

But where does this leave us today? Our denomination recognises that growth is essential for our future. But how are we to grow? There is a new hunger for spiritual meaning in our largely secular societies of Britain and Continental Europe. We Unitarians offer a place for genuine spiritual exploration, unfettered by creeds or dogma. But unless we can offer something more than this, I fear we will not grow.

It's fair to say that religious humanism – or humanism – became increasingly important in our denomination through the 20th Century, particularly in its last three decades. This has been most evident in our chapels in South-East England. However, serious counter-currents are asserting themselves.

For example, after long debate, our General Assembly adopted in 2001 – not a creed – but an Object. It gave voice to our diversity, while emphasising the central role of Theism and the liberal Christian tradition. It defined our purpose as:

*To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.*

Unfortunately, our Object seems to have dropped from view rather. But we're seeing new and powerful calls for a reconnection with the Divine. Early in 2008, at our national Anniversary Service, the Rev Art Lester asked in his sermon: If God does not even appear in our services, how can we expect to attract anyone who's actually looking for him?

This is a clear warning that unless we offer those coming through our doors experiences to sustain the spirit, we're unlikely to keep them for long. So, while we rightly celebrate our diverse beliefs, let us aim too to deepen our spiritual awareness, understanding and faith. Then we will have something valuable to share with all-comers. And let's do this in a spirit of optimism and joy.



## Into the darkness before Easter

**Jim Robinson** and **Yvonne Aburrow** recount two differing Unitarian revivals of Christian Tenebrae services held earlier this year.

Tenebrae (Latin for 'shadows' or 'darkness') is a Christian religious service celebrated by the Western Church on the evening before (or early morning of) Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the last three days of Holy Week. It originated in the fourth century, commemorating the time between the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. It consists of readings and hymns, and a gradual extinguishing of candles, until only one remains. Traditionally, it ends with a loud bang to represent the rending of the veil of the temple.

Twenty members of Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel gathered in the evening of Good Friday. Seven candles were lit on a table, with chairs around in a circle. Otherwise the chapel was dark. It started with 15 minutes of classical music which evoked feelings associated with Jesus' last week and his passion. Then the Rev Jim Robinson led the a 30-minute meditation. Each person was invited to imagine they were living in a small village in Palestine around the year 33AD, and to meet Jesus and join him and his followers on his trip to Jerusalem for Passover. Each event of the final week was imagined as if one were one of his followers.

When it came to seeing Jesus upon the cross, the final seven 'words' (actually phrases or sentences) which he uttered on the cross were spoken. After each 'word' a candle was extinguished and silence ensued. With the final words 'It is finished' the last candle was extinguished and the chapel was dark. After a pause, those present imagined taking the body down from the cross, wrapping it in cloth, and laying it in the tomb, enclosed by a boulder. There was only silence after this and people stayed or left as they felt moved to do. It was a deeply moving experience in preparation for the Good News of Easter.

Ten Unitarians, some from Bristol and some from Frenchay, gathered to observe Tenebrae in Frenchay Chapel on the evening before Maundy Thursday. The service was led by Yvonne Aburrow and Karl Stewart. They placed nine candles on the altar, and extinguished one after each reading, hymn or prayer. There was a minimum of electric light so people could still read the hymns. The mood was solemn and meditative.

Karl spoke about the meaning of Lent as a time for spirituality and meditation; Yvonne spoke about how the myth of Jesus' death and resurrection was so similar to other Middle Eastern dying-and-resurrecting vegetation gods who descend to the underworld --



*Yvonne Aburrow extinguishes the first candle at the Tenebrae service at Frenchay Chapel.*

*(Photo: Peter Wildman).*

expressing the need we all have to descend into the depths to recover lost and forgotten parts of ourselves. Read purely as myth, the story of Jesus becomes a powerful allegory for the death of the ego and the reintegration of the psyche into a new pattern.

The words for the chalice lighting were by Annie Foerster of the UUA, and begin: ‘Come we now out of the darkness of our unknowing.’ The service included two Taizé chants (one by Karl Stewart), the hymn *The April Fool has chosen* by John Bunyan (written for occasions when Easter falls on or near April Fool’s Day), and the hymn *Unitarian Saints* (about Michael Servetus, Faustus Socinus and Francis David). The participants all read together a new translation of the Prayer of Jesus which is supposed to be closer to the original Aramaic. One reading was an excerpt from the Gnostic hymn *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, which is spoken as Sophia (Holy Wisdom, the female aspect of the Logos), a powerful piece expressing the paradoxical nature of Divine Wisdom. Another was *The Fountain*, a poem about the light of consciousness welling up from the dark depths of the soul, by John of the Cross (1542-1591). Then the focus moved to the Garden of Gethsemane, with a reading from Matthew 26: 36-50, and finally to the crucifixion, with a reading from Mark 15: 33-38. After the last hymn, and as Yvonne extinguished the last candle, the rear door was banged loudly. Yvonne then repeated the closing words from the gospel of Mark, “And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom”.

**The Rev Jim Robinson returned to the United States in Spring after six years as minister at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, London. Yvonne Aburrow is a member of Frenchay Chapel near Bristol; she is beginning training for the Unitarian ministry.**



## New Free Christian website

Dr Tim Powell -- who is Treasurer of Bath Unitarians and a UCA member, as well as an editor of the former Free Christian journal, *The Christian Compass* -- has set up a Free Christian website known as Wayfarers. It describes itself thus:

“Wayfarers is a website in the Free Christian tradition ... Free Christianity is not a denomination, more a state of mind. Its essence is to be found in the two traits implied by the very term. The first trait is independence of *mind* ... The second is a belief that doctrinal differences should not hinder common worship.

This attitude means that while Free Christians may not agree with each other on matters of theology, they are seeking an inclusive Christianity that transcends denominational differences and divisive theological arguments of bygone years. The aim is to encompass within one Christian fellowship all who wish to worship God and try to follow the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth ...”

**The new website includes worship material and much else.  
It is at: [www.way-farers.org.uk](http://www.way-farers.org.uk)**

# Hymn for the Centenary Service 2010

*By Lena and Brian Cockcroft*

Sow seeds of freedom, grow a church,  
That's not afraid to speak its mind  
That searches scripture and resolves,  
The truth to find.

Sow seeds of freedom, grow a church  
To creeds and doctrines not a slave,  
Which paves the way with loving deeds  
Cradle to grave.

Sow seeds of freedom grow a church  
That seeks to serve all peoples' needs  
In grief and famine war and pain,  
The hungry feeds.

Sow seeds of freedom grow a church,  
Its faith centred in Jesus' time.  
Yet still remembering rises up  
New hills to climb.

Sow seeds of freedom, grow a church,  
Which preaches calm amid the strife.  
Speaks Jesus' words to all the world  
And brings new life.

Sow seeds of freedom, grow a church  
One hundred years of witness done,\*  
By all who loved her, served her well  
With more to come.

Sow seeds of freedom, grow a church  
Where faithful men and women praise  
And throughout all the future holds  
God guide her days.

Written for the centenary of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.  
(Tune –Almsgiving).

*\*The authors point out that this line can be amended to accommodate other anniversaries.*

**The Rev Brian Cockcroft is Honorary President of the Unitarian Christian Association and a former president of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Both he and the Rev Lena Cockcroft are long-serving ministers in Northern Ireland.**

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Unitarians at Anglican services

As a Unitarian who still attends Anglican services more frequently than Unitarian ones, I found Lucy Harris's article in the Spring edition of *The Herald* about why she attends Anglican worship of particular interest. My principal reasons for attending an Anglican Church are family and geography, but 'theology' is a factor. I think it tells us something about the state of Unitarianism in Britain when a letter appeared in *The Inquirer* from Dr Rosemary Arthur (at around the same time), stating that she too now attends Anglican worship in preference to Unitarian (albeit for different reasons from Lucy Harris). In fact, this was the third such statement I encountered in the course of a few weeks.

It has been said that there are enough unitarians in the Church of England to more than double our denominational numbers (if you believe some evangelicals, there are nearly enough in the Anglican priesthood!) But it now appears that, rather than them coming across to us, Unitarians are going over to them. Of course it is not just for reasons of theology or liturgy or a sense of fellowship. What is a Unitarian to do where there is no reasonable accessible chapel, or when there is no service on a particular Sunday?

As chapels close, this situation will be more common. Of course, in villages and small towns, all non-conformist chapels are disappearing and it is the Anglican Church that is left in possession of the field, in this sense slowly resuming its place as the National Church, and potentially becoming broader. However, while ex-Methodists and ex-Baptists might not like Anglican worship, they will have no significant or insurmountable theological difficulties with it.

The Unitarian Christian Association was formed to offer a place where the liberal Christian tradition could be explored within the Unitarian and Free Christian community in Britain. In the days when I despaired of the pervasive hostility to Christianity within the Unitarian movement and was on the verge of quitting it for the Church of England, I wondered if the best thing for Unitarian witness would actually be the disappearance of the Unitarian denomination. This is not a view I hold now, but it is surely time to consider whether there is not a valuable role for the Unitarian Christian Association in supporting Unitarians within the Anglican Church too.

**Tim Powell, Bath Unitarians**



# FORTHCOMING EVENT

**The UCA LANCE GARRARD MEMORIAL LECTURE 2010**

**LOOKING EAST – An Introduction to Orthodoxy**

By The Rev Canon Hugh Wybrew

**Saturday 30th October 2010**

**Cross Street Chapel, Cross Street, Manchester M2 1NL.**

**Programme:**

12.30 pm - Lunch

2 pm - Holy Communion (The Rev. Jane Barraclough)

3 pm - Lecture

4 pm - Tea and departures.

**ALL WELCOME!** (For further details, and to assist catering planning, please contact Ken Howard 0161 330 1295.)

## UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

Registered Charity No 101 777 1

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For non-UCA members, subscriptions or individual copies of The Herald are available.  
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