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Communion makes a comeback ... p5

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CONTENTS

Editorial: Whisper it softly ...	p2
Moderator's Letter: A beacon of faith	p4
Reclaiming communion – Tristan Jovanović	p5
Eros and the ministry – Carla Grosch-Miller	p8
Reaching across boundaries – Derek McAuley	p13
Forthcoming Events	p16
Evelyn Underhill, the mystic – Jim Corrigan	p17
Our community of faith – Cliff Reed	p22
Is there truth in the Trinity? – Carl Scovell	p25
Prayer and Poems	p30
The Free Christian tradition	p33
What is the UCA?	p34

Cover Photo: *A regular small-group communion service takes place at Kensington Unitarians. Attendance at the monthly service varies between six and 16.*

Editorial: Whisper it softly ...

The eagle-eyed among our regular readers will have spotted that our name, as it appears on the front cover, has expanded. We are no longer merely *The Herald*, but now proudly bear the appellation *The Liberal Christian Herald*.

Why the change? Well, one or two friends have pointed out that the name *Herald*, on its own, does not signify much (we used to be called *The Unitarian Christian Herald*, after all). Now we have decided to call ourselves 'Liberal Christian', reflecting our aim of appealing to a broad audience. This is not a new aim of course, but it takes place in a new context. *What new context? I hear you cry.*

Well, whisper it softly, but Christians are growing in our denomination -- in numbers and influence. This is not the first time this has been said. Three years ago, for example, the newsletter of the Unitarian Renewal Group carried an article saying this (it was written in a mildly regretful tone, by a non-Christian). But *we* have not said this before – until now. Hence our reluctance to say it LOUDLY.

Let's make ourselves clear then – we are a very active society within the General Assembly, and we are growing. We believe this is because we meet a real need in our denomination, and even beyond. We sense a renewed hunger for genuine spirituality, for *faith*. Our task in the Unitarian Christian Association is to help people to deepen their spirituality and to give them the resources for doing so. And we aim to contribute to wider debates. I hope this edition of *The Liberal Christian Herald* will go some way towards fulfilling these goals.

So what have we got this time? Firstly, an article about how communion services have become a regular fixture at one of our London churches. A member there tells the fascinating story of how this came about. Communion was, until recently, a vanishing feature of Unitarian worship, but there's renewed interest in the eucharist (and in Christian sacraments and ritual generally). The reason we celebrate communion at most of our regular Unitarian Christian Association meetings around the country is because of popular demand.

Two further articles indicate how important it is to maintain ecumenical links. Serious work on sexuality and ministry is taking place in other churches, and in ministerial training, as Carla Grosch-Miller's contribution demonstrates. How aware are we of this? And then our General Assembly Chief Officer, Derek McAuley, highlights insights shared at a recent ecumenical gathering he attended.

Evelyn Underhill remains one of the great Christian mystics of the modern age, alongside Thomas Merton and Simone Weil. We carry an assessment of this English mystic. What is her relevance today?

Cliff Reed draws on Paul's belief in the Church as 'the body of Christ' to explore the relationship between members and our church communities. It's good to be reminded of the radical nature of Paul's writings – and that some notorious texts attributed to him (on women, for example) were almost certainly **not** written by Paul, but by later hands fearful of the radical equality of those early Christian communities.

We reprint a seminal article by the Unitarian Universalist veteran Carl Scovell, as a contribution to our continuing debates on the Trinity. He finds much of value in trinitarianism with a small 't'. We aim to provoke, so do enjoy!

Jim Corrigall is a final-year ministry student at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, and a member of Golders Green Unitarians.

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: A beacon of faith



Bob Pounder

I am honoured to have been elected to the position of Moderator at our annual general meeting at Stalybridge (on March 17th). With this honour comes responsibility – and my gratitude. I thank God for the existence of the Unitarian Christian Association which is a beacon of faith for followers of Christ within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

I also express gratitude to my predecessor, the Rev Jeff Gould. During his term of office he has carried out this role with style, professionalism and commitment. His ministerial skill and experience continue to be of great benefit to the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA). On a personal note, Jeff's sound advice on matters ministerial and liturgical has also been of great personal help to me. I look forward to receiving his guidance and that of the UCA officer group in my new role.

I am proud to belong to a Christian tradition that will not be bound by the imposition of creeds or doctrine. We are a small but significant group that has its place within the Christian story. Let us continue to uphold the 'sacred right of private judgement'. I feel that faith should be a simple matter, a matter of acknowledging God in all our ways, of loving God and one's neighbour as one's self. But faith without works is dead and I am pleased that we are raising funds for Christian Aid's Kailahun health project in Sierra Leone, providing essential care to mothers and babies in this region of West Africa.

At the same time, we continue to explore and offer exciting and interesting aspects of the Christian faith to the wider denomination, whether it be Taizé-style worship, Eastern Orthodoxy, or, as at this year's coming Annual Meetings at Keele in April: 'Nine Kinds of Angel' (an introduction to the Enneagram). Our ability to attract healthy attendances at all our events shows we are able to reach out to a wider audience in very meaningful ways.

Finally, I am looking forward to our Summer Meeting at All Souls' Church in Belfast on Saturday July 28th, and meeting our friends and colleagues of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. This will be a new experience for me and I anticipate it will be a very positive one; our two denominations have much in common.

The Rev Bob Pounder is the newly-elected Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, and the minister at Oldham Unitarian Church.



Reclaiming our religious culture

Eighteen months ago, communion was served at Kensington Unitarians for the first time in many years. Despite initial shockwaves it has become a regular event, as *Tristan Jovanović* relates



Tristan Jovanović

For a Christian community, the act of breaking bread and drinking wine is an essential and regular part of worship. In the Anglican church, most parishes celebrate the sacrament weekly in a range of styles from the ‘smells and bells’ of the ‘High Churches’ of the East End of London, to much plainer, simpler services.

I came to Kensington Unitarians after having spent time with the Anglicans and also with the Unitarian Universalists in America. My feelings about the spirituality of the Kensington community were very positive, although there was a reticence about too much ‘God-talk’ and Jesus didn’t seem to get much of an airing. My sense was, and is, that refugees from traditional churches in Unitarian congregations get ‘spooked’ by the possibility that any discussion of God via Christianity will mean a return to the old theism, to judgment, sin and damnation.

I was rescued fairly early in my teenage years from falling into those ways of thinking by the very liberal Episcopal Bishop and writer, John Shelby Spong. I believe that we stand in and for and about a god who is a part of us, not apart from us. My own views of Jesus are often a source of inner conflict, but his actions on the night he was betrayed are for me extremely powerful. The repetition of that act would be something I would miss, were it totally absent.

I brought this up with Jane Blackall, a fellow member of Kensington Unitarians, during one of our friendly morning cups of tea. We agreed that running away from Jesus is different to running away from The Church and that a communion service could be very beneficial for some members of our community. With our minister’s blessing, we hatched a plan: we decided our communion was going to have to be scandalous, wholesome and very personal, with enough opt-out clauses to help anyone feeling fearful.

Our first communion service at Kensington Unitarians was held in October 2010. Our long-term hope was to hold a small-group communion once a month, open to all, after the main Sunday morning service. We anticipated that not all congregation members would

be keen on taking part and so always planned to hold these monthly gatherings in our cosy library room while others were chatting over coffee in the church hall upstairs. However, we wanted to hold the first communion in the main Sunday morning service, offering reflections on our understanding of the ritual's meaning, so that the whole community could 'see what we were up to' -- and we could allay any concerns about this new venture.

The stakes were very high, and no matter how personal and explanatory our addresses or how many escape-hatches we provided, someone was not going to like it. When it came to the Eucharist itself, Jane and I stood together at the table with a very large and unwieldy loaf of bread. Only one person reacted so strongly he felt he had to leave for a few moments. Later, after he had time to reflect, we had a friendly conversation about his response. A good portion of the congregation present took part.

We retreated to see if we had any wounds to nurse. At once I was proud of my friends for taking part but angry that they had been so resistant. I find the disconnect between many Unitarians' openness to other traditions, but fear of anything remotely Christian, confusing and dangerous. It sends a coded message of hypocrisy that is one of our liberal faith's greatest weaknesses: there is such a fascination with other traditions, that the 'home' tradition becomes the other and alien, therefore a source of fear.

But by reforming the acts which have been to a certain extent 'kidnapped' by the traditional church, Unitarians are in a most advantageous position. We can re-form Christianity for those who feel abandoned or hurt. We can make the teachings of Jesus central, act with compassion, listen with an open heart and affirm the abundance of life. We just need to be risky, as Jesus was risky.

After a few weeks, many of those who had been concerned by our communion service were coming to say they were glad we had done it. Some of these people form the core of our small-group communion, which has now been held monthly since November 2010. I think it is safe to say that there is a much greater openness in the congregation to the regular small-group communion service than we could have anticipated. So, as we had intended, we now meet once a month in the lower room (our library) after the main Sunday morning service. This well-loved place suits our purposes – for space and quiet. We attract varying numbers, from around six to 16 attenders.

A different person leads the communion service each month. This leads to a wide variety of liturgies, ranging from those with a traditional feel to the much more radical. There is an earthiness to all of these, where we experiment with different versions of the Lord's Prayer or the presence or absence of an epiclesis (*the invocation of God's spirit over the bread and wine*). Our readings may be a verse from the Bible coupled with a poem about baking bread by Gunilla Norris, or a Sufi story.

Our prayers come from sources which inspire us. When I described our communion service to my (Anglican) university chaplain, she was quite envious of our flexibility in comparison with the prescriptions in *Common Worship*, the Anglican liturgy, however broadly one can adjust texts within the boundaries of remaining seemly and reverent.

Although no two communion services with set liturgy are ever the same, ours have the potential to be so radically different that they could knock one to the core. That is the point of our community and the point of the Eucharist. It is a sacrament, which is, to borrow the Anglican expression, an outward sign of an inward grace. Grace is not easy.

We keep a record of our services so that we are slowly building a library of our liturgies. Its purpose is two-fold: it serves as inspiration for whoever has volunteered for the next service and it is a living document of our community. It shows the range of theological expression we have, our approach to nature and each other. It is a developing microcosm of Kensington Unitarians and a reification of our liberal faith.

We may yet experiment with other sacraments. There is power in these depths of human communion and action. One step at a time, we can reclaim the most important parts of our religious culture and nurture them for the 21st century.

Tristan Jovanović is a member of Kensington Unitarians and a student of law at Queen Mary, University of London.



Christ with the Eucharist, by Joan de Joanes (1523-1579).
(Wikipedia, Public Domain)

Eros, sexuality and the ministry

A recent study showed that Church ministers transgress sexual boundaries with someone in their care much more often than secular counsellors do. Ministry teacher *Carla Grosch-Miller* explains the value of creating safe spaces for exploring sexuality

It was the beginning of the second day of a course I was running entitled *Sex and ministry: 'living with the urgent power of the erotic'*¹. I hadn't slept well. The first day had ended with a strong statement offered by a participant that sex belonged only in marriage, and that marriage was God-ordained between one man and one woman. No-one had risen to articulate a different view.

I had laboured to make the space safe and open. The participants in this course held diverse theological viewpoints; I had hoped that we could teach each other as we explored the topic. One of the three S's that shapes my teaching is **space that respects the sanctity of the individual**. In the first session, after I introduce myself and my assumptions (which include that all four sources of theology are of value and that each of us will weight those sources differently), I ask the group to create Rules of the Road: guidelines to enable respectful and searching conversation among people with diverse viewpoints. This group had included in those Rules:

- Be open to where others come from; have an open mind, an open heart.
- Disagreement is with ideas; respect the idea-holder.

I view my educator role as providing information and making the space for participants to engage it and each other. When a viewpoint is expressed particularly strongly, I expect (or may ask for) opposing viewpoints to emerge from other participants. At the end of the first day in this course, in response to the strong statement articulating the traditional view, this had not happened. As I tossed and turned that night, I wondered if, in my striving to make the space safe for all, I had leaned too far in one direction.

At breakfast the next day, another participant approached me and asked if he could talk. He said: *I'm really angry about how the class ended yesterday. I've been angry all night. I felt like I was being told that I was not a Christian.* 'Can you say more?', I asked. He then told me his story: a story of a young man active in church struggling with his sexuality, who, when he had his first sexual experience with another man, was full of self-loathing. He became strident in his opposition to homosexuality, as insistent as others had been the day before that sex was for married heterosexual couples ... until he couldn't bear the dissonance between what his heart knew and what he wished he could live up to. He told his vicar about his struggle – who promptly removed him from all church responsibilities and let him know that there was no room in the church for him. He continued to wrestle with the issues of sex and faith until he came to accept who he was and discovered a renewed and deepened faith that in time blossomed into a vocation for

ministry. I asked him if he would be willing simply to tell his story at the start of the day's class, and he said *yes*.

I began day two recalling that there are four sources of theology – scripture, tradition, reason and experience – and that each had value and each had problems. Three quarters of the first day had been spent mining the Bible and tradition for sexual attitudes and assumptions, and the class had come to understand that biblical sexual ethics are quite different from what we call Christian family values today. We had looked at ancient Hebrew culture, where women were considered domestic and sexual property, fertile women needed to bear five live children to replace their generation, where most births ended in death before the child reached its first birthday. Concern for procreation, property rights, and purity laws that kept the Hebrew people distinct from their Promised Land neighbours had created a sexual ethic that included polygamy, concubinage, levirate marriage, rules allowing rape in war with distant enemies, and the requirement that a rapist marry his Hebrew victim. We noticed the New Testament's relative lack of concern about sexual matters and how a central message of the gospels was that people's relationship was no longer determined by following physical purity laws, but by purity of heart: loving God and neighbour as self.

We traced the development of Christian sexual ethics, shaped by the revulsion of the body present in late antiquity and dualistic and misogynist thinking, hearing Tertullian describe women as 'the devil's gateway' and Jerome say 'Blessed is the man who dashes his genitals against a rock'. We noted how the development of Christian sexual ethics was a journey that attempted to modulate a basically negative view of sex by first finding it acceptable for procreative purposes and later good for the sake of the communion of husband and wife. We then took a detour into contemporary times and heard what Freud, Jung, Kinsey, Fisher and others had to say about sex and love, its psychological importance and its neurological components. After all this, we began to write and post on the wall theological principles that would enable us to think theologically and pastorally about sex. It was then that the strong statement was made, just minutes before the end of the day.

Now it was day two. I said that at the conclusion of the previous day, we had heard a strong articulation of a scriptural and traditional view of the place of sex in human life, and asked if there were any other viewpoints, perhaps drawing on other sources of theology. The man who had approached me at breakfast raised his hand and gently and simply told his story.

The impact of the story was to transform the space, opening and warming it. Others thanked him for his



Statue of Eros, the Greek god of love, in the Naples Archeological Museum. (Wikipedia, Public Domain)

courage in sharing; there was acknowledgement by voices who held the heterosexual marriage only viewpoint that, while their opinions on the topic of homosexuality were strong, there was a need for pastoral sensitivity when dealing with this subject. That sensitivity was embodied by many and diverse people on diverse topics as the course progressed.

Whenever I teach in this area, I move from exploring scripture and tradition and identifying theological principles, to the link between sexuality and spirituality. As I said earlier, there are **three S's** that shape my teaching. **The first** is setting up a **space that respects the sanctity of the individual**. **The second S is structure:** the course can be envisioned as a drama with three acts. Act One locates us as Christian people in the 21st century, reviewing biblical, traditional and contemporary views of sex and gender and teasing out theological themes that may help in thinking theologically and pastorally about sex. I begin with the Bible and tradition because whenever we deal with sexual issues in a church context, we bring our understandings of them, as well as our personal experience. We need to reflect critically on what the Bible and tradition actually say and what assumptions lie beneath those sources.² We then need to identify theological principles that help us to think about and respond to sexual issues.

The second Act of the drama introduces a new thought landscape, drawing on the link between sexuality and spirituality, and enables a new framework for Christian sexual ethics that affirms the goodness of the gift of sexuality. After a mini-lecture about how both sex and spirit operate in identity, development, relationship, creativity and transcendent experience, I ask the group to formulate a new framework for Christian sexual ethics: one premised not on procreation, property and ancient purity concerns, but rather on the aspiration **to live out one's sexuality sacramentally**. Informed by the theological thinking in the first third of the course, the group articulates a holistic view of sex as gift and self-giving, using 'thou shalt' as a template. The lists generated come to include such things as: *Thou shalt* know, love, accept and become/be oneself; treasure the other and seek their flourishing; be faithful in relationship; be willing to learn to give and receive pleasure; nourish the fruits of the Spirit; be open to healing, transformation, grace and creativity.

Act Two also includes the opportunity to do auto-ethnographic work. One of the convictions I bring to this work is that that training for ministry must engage personal experience.³ Self-knowledge and self-awareness are key tools in enabling good ministry, which includes preventing sexual misconduct. Our personal knowledge of our own sexual experience and attitudes is subjugated, tacit knowledge.⁴ Whenever I teach in this area, I invite participants to do reflective writing throughout the course – using oblique and not so oblique methods to enable them to uncover the experiences and attitudes that shape where they are in their sexual formation. Methods include: word-association; icon/image identification; reflective writing of prose and/or poetry; autobiographical 'life lines' for sexual and spiritual events; conversation within boundaries. No one is required to share anything personal. Some do share personal information with the larger group, and some do not. In individual interviews conducted after the event, I have been struck by the identification of vulnerability and working through of early sexual experience that those methods had facilitated.

In class, after giving time to work auto-ethnographically, I invite participants into pairs for a reflective listening exercise on the topic of ‘sexuality and spirituality’. In the plenary after the exercise, as the group reflects on what it is like to speak of such holy things and what it is like to listen, it is common for the room to be hushed and reverent as people acknowledge the privilege and the challenge of ‘hearing one another into speech’⁵.

Act Three takes us to the streets, addressing the nitty gritty of sex in ministry, and enabling work with sexual issues -- our own and those of others. **The third ‘S’** guiding this work is most explicit here – **Safety**. Not just safety in the space opened up for honest exploration, but safety in the practice of ministry. One of the primary goals of this course is to enable people in the church to inhabit their vocations in a way that is healthy and safe for themselves and for their ministry settings. I became a church sex worker because of the shocking prevalence and potentially devastating impact of ministerial sexual misconduct: a Canadian study suggests that ministers transgress sexual boundaries with someone in their care at a rate of twice that of secular counsellors.⁶ I wanted to understand how better to prevent the suffering caused when ministers transgress sexual boundaries.

Thus the last third of the course works on safety in ministry: looking at boundaries, power, vulnerability and intimacy in ministry; considering the prevalence and impact of ministerial sexual abuse; and working with scenarios in pastoral ministry. Space is made to enable people to raise sexual issues in pastoral ministry. Issues that arise include pornography, sex addiction, marriage preparation, bereavement as a time of heightened sexual desire, youth work. The discussions I’ve witnessed have been frank, self-revealing and compassionate.

The final scene in Act Three is called *taking good care*, the focus of which is that self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-awareness and self-care are some of our most important tools in ministry. We look at the expectations of others in the ministry settings and our own, and labour to articulate how we may manage those expectations for the good of all.

At the end, I do a quick *what worked* and *what could work better* evaluation. Invariably people remark that the course should be a required part of the syllabus (if it is not already), that learning what the Bible and tradition really say is important, and that having a place in the church to struggle honestly and holistically with sexual issues is essential for these times.

The title of my exploration is *Celebrating our Sexuality: Preparing Future Church Leaders for Pastoral Care*. Good pastoral care is informed, sensitive and safe pastoral care. Good pastoral care is about the pastoral carer communicating in her body and by her words a sense of welcome and hospitality, and having at her disposal tools to enable light and space for sexual issues to be expressed and wrestled with. The pastoral carer brings with her attitudes about Biblical and traditional sexual ethics and her own life experience, attitudes and experiences she has hopefully had an opportunity to work through. She also carries the imprimatur of church authority; she’s been given a role, a certificate of approval, to hold these sensitive areas. She needs to be adequately prepared to wrestle with scripture and tradition and know where she stands and why; to respond to contemporary understandings of sex and sexuality; to listen sensitively as others wrestle

with these questions themselves; and to articulate a holy and holistic ethic that enables the living out of sexuality sacramentally.

The Rev Carla Grosch-Miller is a United Reform Church minister in Oxford, who lectures on the theology of sexuality on ministerial training programmes in Britain. A former civil rights attorney in Alaska, she began her own ministerial training with the Unitarian Universalists in America before switching to the United Church of Christ.

- *This article is based on a paper given last year at an ecumenical conference in London organised by the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality.*

¹ 'Living happily with the urgent power of the erotic' is a phrase coined by Timothy Radcliffe, OP. 2005. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* London and NY: Burnes & Oates, p.99.

² Transformative learning theory posits that critical reflection is essential to such learning. See Mezirow, Jack and Associates. 2000. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³ See, also, Guindon, J. (1993) *The Integral Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood*, Montreal: Éditions Paulines (trans. Terrence Prendergast, S.J.), recommending a Human Formation Counsellor to work alongside seminarians to promote psycho-sexual integration.

⁴ Butler Scally, Dorothy 2000. "Personal Sexual Story: A Radical Vehicle for Transformative Learning in Adult Education". PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow.

⁵ Nelle Morton. 1985. *The Journey is Home.*

⁶ Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. 2002. *Time for Action: Sexual abuse, the Churches and a new dawn for survivors.* London: CTBI, p. 83.

UCA RETREAT 2012

The Unitarian Christian Association will be holding a Retreat at The Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow, Derbyshire, **from Wednesday 19th until Friday 21st September.** All are welcome.

The cost for full board from Wednesday dinner to Friday lunch will be £104 for a standard room. There will be an extra charge of £5 for single occupancy of twin rooms and £7.50 for en-suite rooms.

For more information about The Nightingale Centre, please go to www.thenightingalecentre.org.uk

If you have any queries, or would like to book a place on this Retreat, please contact Jean Bradley on revjeanbradley@yahoo.co.uk

Reaching across the boundaries



Derek McAuley

Our denomination often seems outside mainstream church life, but as *Derek McAuley* found at a recent ecumenical gathering on leadership, we have much to give and to learn from such encounters

For Unitarians and Free Christians with an historic perspective, the phrase ‘leadership of Jesus’ has a particular meaning. It brings to mind the five precepts of the American James Freeman Clarke of what was widely seen as mainstream Unitarianism in Britain until the First World War. The leadership of Jesus was how we related to the figure of Jesus, having cast off the orthodox view of Jesus as King and/or Saviour with all that said about his status as part of the Trinity.

Across the 20th century, the Unitarian view of Jesus as ‘leader’ seems to have fallen away as more universalist perspectives emerged. We certainly could not easily sing the childhood chorus ‘Follow, Follow we will Follow Jesus, anywhere ...’!

I have been reflecting on this change following my attendance at a recent conference ‘Leading Across Boundaries’, held at Sarum College in Salisbury and organised by an ecumenical management and leadership grouping (known as MODEM). This was my second conference with this group since I took up post as Chief Officer (in 2010), and it again proved a valuable networking opportunity as well as for personal development. This ecumenical grouping sees itself as a hub for leadership, management and ministry and is a small-membership organisation, made up of individuals with an interest in these areas, both within the church and beyond. The group is best known for its series of books published by Canterbury Press; it has delivered training events and has an excellent newsletter and website. Its current chair is the Rev Elizabeth Welch, a United Reformed Church Minister and former West Midlands Synod Moderator.

Twenty six of us gathered for the conference; a small group with lots of opportunity to get to know one another over the 24-hour period. It opened with a keynote address by Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, followed by a series of workshop presentations. Bishop Cottrell spoke on ‘Setting the Interior Compass’, drawing on his experiences of leadership in the Church of England and other arenas. He is a popular author and I would recommend his recent book *Hit the Ground Kneeling: Seeing Leadership Differently*, a remarkable comment on the tendency to expect new appointees to come up with all the answers without even giving them the chance to experience the new situation in which they find themselves. He urges us to find time to stop. Jesus, of course, began his ministry with a time in the wilderness, and regularly sought out times for seclusion and retreat.

The workshops were a mix of theory and research based on practice. I was particularly interested by Tim Harle who talked about crossing the threshold and for leaders to encourage people to meet across boundaries. He presented the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, as a supreme example of boundary spanning. As Jesus was living in the world, similarly the church needs to depend upon the community and culture in which we live. Andy Henley drew a parallel between the isolation of small business owners and clergy, saying that both groups could benefit from development opportunities based on experiential learning rather than theory.

The importance of identity – our basic social self – to enable us to climb out of our ‘silos’ was stressed by Sue Hetherington. Rob Sharp of the River Leadership School in Exeter described their leadership programme for young adults, based on a biblical model of ‘exile prophets’, and intended to raise Christian leaders to influence a secular environment; to influence what he saw as a post-Christian nation.

Emerging themes for leadership were seen in a group discussion as the development of new forms of church *versus* fundamentalism and/or atheism with different models of leadership gaining currency. Younger people need to be involved but there is also a role for the elders as a coach. Engagement in the Church is not about the ‘truth’ but about how it ‘fits with my life’ and young people will ask: “Do I want to be like you?” Social justice is a key part of the search for authenticity. For some there were lots of possibilities for change -- but it is not happening.

To some extent my participation in these meetings is a personal act of boundary-jumping. It is sometimes not easy. I can find the certainty of some unsettling. The sense of victimhood of others, especially of an evangelical bent, is at times out of all proportion to the reality of the situation in Britain when compared to challenges to religious freedom in other parts of the world. It is assumed that everyone shares the basics.

The non-creedal nature of Unitarianism and Free Christianity is not readily understood; indeed we should no longer imagine that many mainstream Christians even know about us and our perspectives, particularly



WHAT KIND OF LEADER? Jesus the Good Shepherd. Stained glass window at St John the Baptist Anglican Church, New South Wales. Stained glass: Alfred Handel. Photo: Toby Hudson. (GNU Free Documentation Licence).

lay people. We are often initially confused with the United Reform Church and increasingly on the margins.

Yet we can point to learning from our own experience and heritage which are of benefit to the wider church. As Unitarians we are used to leading across boundaries and we can model behaviour for others in how we relate to people of faith and those from non-faith groups. Indeed, the whole issue of boundaries, of margins and of the edge is something that in so many ways defines us. Many orthodox Christians see us on or even 'beyond the fringe'. Unlike our friends in the Quakers, we have been formally excluded from national, and some local, ecumenical forums; but we manage to creep in sometimes and disturb the cosiness.

Interestingly, evidence from the United States on perceptions of the Unitarian Universalists is that, to people of other faiths, they remain in the Christian 'camp'. This is perhaps not that surprising when most Sunday morning services are firmly in the Protestant format, albeit with a different content. Unitarians are of course very active in ecumenical and inter-faith activities leading across traditional boundaries. As I have found from my recent engagement with the Council of Christians and Jews, this is not without risks and one can easily be subject to criticism. Many Unitarians have been active as leaders in their local communities in a range of political and charitable activities.

Surely the life of Jesus shows us that risk-taking to reach across the boundaries is integral to leadership in the world we find ourselves, as he did in his. Role-models such as Premier League footballers are in the news, particularly when their behaviour falls short of society's expectations and they are told they are role models, something they perhaps had not realised and that came with the huge salary or adulation. Yet as former senior civil servant Peter Shaw has written: "Strong role models are very compelling. We are all influenced by the leaders whose names and pictures we carry in our minds. Measured by his impact on history, Jesus was an outstanding leader."*

He points to several characteristics:

- Jesus as Visionary. Jesus was clear-sighted about his mission. He had a vision for the future about the Kingdom of God which inspired his disciples.
- Jesus as Servant Leader. He washed the feet of his disciples. He came 'not to be served but to serve', and proclaimed "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled".
- Jesus as Teacher. His impact was through actions and stories enabling his hearers to grow in their understanding.
- Jesus as coach. He worked with his disciples both as a group and as individuals.
- Jesus as radical. "He was unorthodox right from the start ...He was constantly taking people by surprise". He broke the mould and could act with gentleness and also boldness, overturning the tables in the temple.
- Jesus as healer. He brought physical, emotional and spiritual healing.

One of the participants at the conference was the author John Adair, who has worked at senior levels of the Church of England and the United Nations. In his book *The Leadership of Jesus*, he highlighted both the visionary and the servant leader themes. He

has also more recently written on *The Leadership of Mohammed*, giving a perspective from the life of another great religious leader.

We are all leaders in our respective spheres, be it in a congregation or other body within the wider Unitarian and Free Christian Movement, in our communities, or with wider groups. We are all called upon to work across boundaries. Peter Shaw's six characteristics drawing upon the life of Jesus are surely worth considering as we look to develop our own leadership skills within the context of the changing patterns of society and church life, as explored at this conference.

- '*Mirroring Jesus as Leader*', Grove Books Limited, 2004.

Derek McAuley is Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday 4th April:

UCA Event at Annual Meetings, including speaker on *Nine Kinds of Angel – an introduction to the Enneagram*. 1.45 pm (room to be announced), at Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG.

Monday 16th April: Fresh Approaches to the Bible.

Golders Green Unitarians, 31 ½ Hoop Lane, London NW11 8BS. Promptly at 7.30 pm. Nearest tube: Golders Green.

Monthly Bible-reading class, organised by London District Liberal Christian Affinity Group. Led by Jim Corrigan. Please bring a Bible (any edition). This group will continue *on the third Monday of each month*, until at least July 2012.

Saturday 28th July: UCA Summer Meeting. All Souls Church (Non-Subscribing Presbyterian), Elmwood Avenue, Belfast BT9 6AZ. <http://www.allsoulsbelfast.com/>

Saturday 27th October: UCA Autumn Meeting. Brighton Unitarian Church, New Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 1UF. www.brightonunitarian.org.uk

The last English mystic?

The 20th century mystic Evelyn Underhill brought good sense and humour to her quest for the Eternal. *Jim Corrigan* explores her significance in a recent sermon

Evelyn Underhill was well-known in England in the first half of last century, a mystic and writer who brought mysticism to a wide public through her books. She was born into the upper middle-class in 1875, the daughter of a barrister, she married a barrister, living in Kensington in West London. Largely self-taught, Evelyn Underhill became a renowned authority on mysticism, and also a leading theologian of her time. She is less well-known today, but her books on mysticism still sell, and remain influential. Perhaps she could be called ‘the last English mystic’, but I want to return to this later.

As a young adult, Evelyn Underhill was an atheist, then drawn to theism through the neo-Platonists (particularly Plotinus). She was to become deeply attracted to Catholicism, spurred by the mystical experiences she’d had from her youth. She almost joined the Roman Catholic Church, but opposition from her family -- and the decrees issued against modernism by the Pope from 1907 -- meant she did not, becoming later an Anglo-Catholic within the Church of England. She developed into a popular speaker and Retreat leader, the first woman to lead Retreats for the Anglican clergy. She is described as lively, quick-witted, with a vivid personality and full of humour.

I confess I’d not read her books until recently, but I knew that her first substantial work, published in 1911 and simply entitled ‘Mysticism’, had been an acknowledged influence on the poet T.S. Eliot. But it’s through her link with Manchester College, Oxford, where I’m studying, that I first found her books – a great shelf of them in the special section of the library. She was invited by the College, then run by Unitarians, to give a series of prestigious lectures in religion, named after a prominent Unitarian, Professor Charles Upton, who’d recently died. Those inaugural Upton Lectures in Religion, delivered in 1921, were collected together into a book, ‘The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today’. And through this invitation, Evelyn Underhill became the first woman lecturer in the theology faculty of the University of Oxford.

Her lectures are a summary of her views on mysticism, or the ‘life of the spirit’. What makes Evelyn Underhill particularly valuable, is that she was not only a practising mystic, but also a powerful theologian, philosopher and writer. And her work is enlivened by a kind of robust common sense that epitomises a certain kind of upper-middle class Englishwoman.

But first, what is mysticism? In another of her books, the delightfully-entitled ‘Practical Mysticism for Normal People’, she defines it thus:

“Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.”

Note she uses the term 'Reality' for the Transcendent. She points out that what we normal people think of as reality – what we see and experience in our everyday lives -- is a very blinkered version, a constructed one, that can shut us off from the Eternal.

But why should we want to unite with the Eternal? She maintains we can only know a thing by uniting with it, wisdom is the fruit of communion – whereas ignorance is for those who stand apart. She distinguishes sharply the striving for 'union with Reality', from 'wallowing in spiritual emotions' or 'leading a dreamy and selfish life' – from ways 'Normal People' often regard mysticism in fact. But her definition is a brief one; in her 'Life of the Spirit' lectures, she gives a fuller account.

For Underhill, the spiritual life is an instinct, a biological urge – for fullness of life, for God. She uses the terms Ultimate Power, Reality and God interchangeably, but she is clear this is one and the same Power -- the 'One Transcendent Object' towards which 'all our twisting pathways run'. So although our ways of approaching Reality may differ, our differing religious paths, the Transcendent Power we all strive towards is one and the same.

Yet we can only encounter this Reality through our human experience. She writes that the Life of the Spirit is such a genuine fact that it meets us 'at all times and in all places and at all levels' of life. And this experience of a 'more abundant life', she says, is more real and more concrete 'than any of the systems of theology which explain it'. So experience is more vivid – and more real -- than theology.

So are there common elements to mystical experience? She writes that experiences of the Transcendent Reality take three main forms.

First, a profound sense of security, of being safely held in a cosmos in which, despite all appearances to the contrary, peace is at the very heart. All the great mystics describe this experience – she highlights similarities in their interpretations, as they use the symbolisms of space, stillness and light: the contemplative soul is 'lost in the ocean of the Godhead'; 'enters his silence', or as Dante wrote: "My vision entered deeper and deeper into the ray of Supernatural Light."

The second characteristic of mystical experience is that the relationship with the Transcendent is felt as the 'intimate and reciprocal communion' of a Person with a Person. Great mystics have always felt the necessity 'of a personal contact, a prevenient and an answering love'. Evelyn Underhill writes that in this contact, mystics feel impelled to surrender ... and that this surrender is felt to evoke a response. Even modern liberalism is forced to acknowledge this; she quotes from 'Upton the Unitarian', who writes:

"If this Absolute Presence, which meets us face to face in the most momentous of our life's experiences, (if it) cannot fitly be called a personal experience, it is only because this word personal is too poor and carries with it associations too human ... adequately to express this profound God-consciousness."

So even Upton the Unitarian is awe-struck before Transcendent Reality!

Thirdly and finally, mystics experience the Spirit as an ‘inflowing power’ ... energising the self or the group ... giving it fresh joy and vigour. This sense of enhanced life, she says, is a mark of all religions of the spirit. She quotes the Indian sage, Devendrenath Tagore: ‘Having found God, the current of my life flowed swiftly. I gained fresh strength.’ And Isaiah: ‘... they that wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings of eagles.’

These three experiences then of finding God, are: firstly, the transcendent or cosmic; second, the personal; and thirdly, a dynamic, energising power. These three forms are complementary, and, in turn, sustain our intellect, feeling and will.

Underhill goes on to say these three ways of realising our contact with God are crystallised in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. She follows this with an observation I think Unitarians should note: ‘Like so many other dogmas, it (the doctrine of the Trinity) is an attempt to describe experience’. So the Trinity is firstly an experiential rather than an intellectual truth. And the sense mystics have of the *Divine within*, she writes: ‘is dramatized for Christianity in the historic incarnation ... and continued by the beautiful conception of the eternal and indwelling Christ’. So these are *experiential* truths.

As we respond to Transcendent Reality, we feel an obligation to fulfill its meaning, to carry the experience of love outwards into the world. But this requires inward transformation, growth and change. So the discovery of God always brings with it ideas of birth and regeneration – and the mystic should always veer between contemplation and action, she writes. And in the greatest mystics, these two states come together; Underhill writes of the great Sufi, Abu Said, of whom it was said: ‘he did all normal things, ever-thinking of God’.

Few of us will attain this ideal, yet all who seek a fuller life of the spirit, need to balance action and contemplation; for to emphasise one over the other creates imbalance. Underhill points to the perfect achievement of balance in Jesus – the rich expression of his gifts in the Gospels, was ‘directly dependent’, she says, on the nights he spent ‘on the mountain in prayer’.

She notes too the devotional nature of the mystical quest, found throughout the literature of mysticism, in Christianity and Hinduism, and in Islam in the impassioned longing of the Sufis for the Beloved. Even Plotinus writes of ‘the passion of the lover resting on the bosom of his love’.



Evelyn Underhill as a young woman.
Photo: William Edward Downey. (Wikipedia, Public Domain in EU, Australia and US).

These experiences are part of the full spiritual life, but she cautions that humans bring along all their human – and sub-human – feelings and emotions. And, she says, the intellect should show mercy here. Mercy towards what exactly? Well, it's often noted that mystics write in deeply sensual, even sexual terms of union with the Divine. Evelyn Underhill is asking for understanding of this – for we can *only* bring our human experience to union. That robust common sense I referred to earlier!

But our experience of union with the Divine needs to be lifted to conscious realisation. This, she says, is the business of religion -- any real religion must give us a wider view, a conception of our lives in harmony with the spiritual universe. Our religion may give us this 'in the form of a Creed, but otherwise we must build our own City of God'. Of course, we Unitarians and Free Christians reject imposed Creeds, so we must build our own City of God.

So, what can we learn from all this?

First, it's worth noting that the decision of Manchester College to invite Evelyn Underhill to give the inaugural Upton lectures, came at a time when many in our denomination were reaching out to other Christians, even looking to re-unite with them in a wider union (for example, through the Society of Free Catholics). This yearning to unite with other Christians is a spirit we've largely left behind – and perhaps that's a pity.

Second, Evelyn Underhill is spiritually rigorous – can we Unitarians say the same? In her overview of European mysticism, she exercises critical judgement, distinguishing between balanced and unbalanced forms of mysticism, and identifying tendencies she sees as decadent. Not all religious paths are of equal worth -- nor even healthy – she makes distinctions. And she is rigorous in stressing that the mystical path is hard work. The mystic must pass through a series of stages, through patience and discipline. This idea that the way to Truth is difficult, is shared with other great spiritual paths, including Buddhism and Sufism.

The education of the mystic has two main phases, Underhill writes: the purification of the senses, and the purification of the will. To purify the senses, is to release them from 'the tyranny of egocentric judgements ... (so as) to make them organs of direct perception'. Only after purgation, can we move towards union with the Transcendent.

Evelyn Underhill died in 1941 after a full and active life. She was in demand as a spiritual director and speaker almost to the end. In many ways, she was very much a 'normal person' herself. Her marriage was a happy one, and although her husband was not himself interested in mysticism, he supported her work. Their main recreation together was sailing. A follower of Christian socialism, she initially supported the First World War, but changed her views and was a pacifist for the rest of her life.

Religious hierarchies are often uncomfortable with mystics. Some of Evelyn Underhill's religious views were initially unorthodox; she became more orthodox as time went on, but retained her lively and independent spirit.

When I asked in my title whether Evelyn Underhill was the *last* English mystic, I confess it was a bit mischievous. Because although she may be the last *famous* English mystic, the Christian contemplative tradition she espouses is still alive in Britain. Where? Well firstly, in Anglican and Catholic monastic orders. Many of these houses of prayer are open to seekers and would-be contemplatives. In our own Unitarian denomination, we have national retreats, including for meditation. And some of our congregations organise their own spiritual awaydays.

Of course not all of us want to develop in this way. Whatever our aims though, we should realise that spiritual growth is a quest, that requires we learn from the wisdom of others. But *all* of us can deepen our spiritual lives in simple ways; for example, by setting aside a short time each day for prayer or meditation or reflection. And we could start this straight away.

So may the example of Evelyn Underhill inspire us all to seek fuller and richer lives, true 'lives of the spirit'.

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Our community of faith

The belief of Paul that the church is ‘the body of Christ’ still holds true, argues *Cliff Reed* in a membership service sermon to Ipswich Unitarians

A favourite reading of mine for a Membership Service such as this is Paul’s account, in 1 Corinthians 12, of the variety of gifts and the variety of roles that are to be found in a congregation, a community of faith. Paul believed that the church, meaning the community of men and women who gather regularly for worship, *is* the body of Christ – the physical resurrection embodying the Spirit that Jesus had bequeathed to them. And he taught that membership of the church – the body – is not conditional on any of the restrictions that are usually applied to membership – such as your gender, your nationality or ethnic group, your social status, your wealth or lack of it, your religious background or the language you speak.

In the church, as Paul preached it, all of its members enjoy spiritual equality, both women and men*, whatever their social status outside it, and all are equally honoured and valued. We may not agree with Paul on everything, but surely his concept of the church community as a single body, united by a spiritual bond that transcends all divisions, remains true for us. And it is not a narrow, restrictive bond. It is flexible. It allows for diversity of thought, diversity of the particulars of belief, and all the rich diversity that human nature presents us with. But there are things that it does not allow for.

The uniting bond of faith and spirit does not allow for the things that are hurtful, unloving, and unkind; the things that are malicious, mean, and cruel; the things that are arrogant, hard-hearted, and inhumane; the things that are narrow-minded, bigoted, and self-righteous. None of these things belongs in a community such as this, and when they do occur, it is cause for shame and repentance.

None of this means that a community such as ours, for all that we share, is – or could be, or should be – uniform. We value our diversity, and that includes our diversity of opinion and experience in matters of faith. But not only in matters of faith, and this takes me back to Paul. He writes about what he calls, ‘varieties of gifts’, ‘varieties of service’, and ‘varieties of activity’ – in all of which the same Spirit, the same God, is active. These gifts, as Paul saw them, include, ‘the gift of wise speech’; the gift of ‘putting the deepest knowledge into words’; the gifts of faith, healing, prophecy, and so on. But these gifts are not all to be found in any one person. They are distributed throughout the community, with one person proficient in one gift, the next person in another, and so on. All the gifts are valued and to be the recipient of one doesn’t make you superior to the recipient of another. As Paul writes, “All these gifts are the activity of one and the same Spirit, distributing them to each individual at will.” (*1 Corinthians 12: 11*)

Paul likens the gifts and those who receive them, to the many organs in the human body. None could function independently of the whole. The whole could not function properly,

if at all, without every one of its organs. As Paul writes: “But God has combined the various parts of the body, giving special honour to the humbler parts, so that there might be no division in the body, but that all its parts might feel the same concern for one another.” (*1 Corinthians 12: 24-25*)

This is a warning for anyone who might be tempted to feel that they are rather higher up the food-chain because of the gifts and talents with which they have been blessed!

Paul goes on to talk about particular roles that members of the community might be called to fulfil. He lists them in a certain order but this should not be taken to mean that the individual whom, as Paul puts it, ‘God has appointed’ to be an apostle is therefore superior the individual who ‘God has appointed’ to be a prophet, or a teacher, or any of the other roles which he mentions. Some gifts, some roles may be (or seem to be) more crucial for the functioning of the community than others, but this doesn’t confer superiority on the person appointed to fulfil them – only a greater responsibility! In any case, we can’t all do the same jobs! As Paul puts it, with a rhetorical flourish: “Are all apostles? All prophets? All teachers?... Do all have gifts of healing?...” (*1 Corinthians 12: 30*)



St Paul writing his Epistles. Painting by Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632), held in the Blaffer Foundation Collection, Houston, Texas. (Wikipedia Public Domain, including in the US).

So, there are varieties of gifts within the church community and there are varieties of jobs to do. We are not all suited to do all the jobs! But we are all suited to do something, just as each organ of the body has its function, however modest, even insignificant, it may seem. And the life and work of the religious community depends on everyone using their particular gifts and talents to make a contribution, even if that is no more than being part of the worshipping congregation on a Sunday morning. Simply to be here; to add your voice to the singing, your devotion to the prayers, your person to the fellowship, is to contribute more than might be imagined.

But, of course, our community – like all others – has more roles to fulfil for those with the gifts, the time, and the good health to do so. We may not have *designated* jobs for ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ to do, but we do need people to be our trustees – to take responsibility for the efficient administration of our affairs. And from among them we need people to take responsibility for our finances, our property (including this wonderful Meeting House), our membership matters, our interaction with the wider movement and the wider community, and so on. And this not just about those elected to be trustees, who are, after all, simply members of the Meeting.

Being a member of this community should not be onerous. It should be rewarding, joyful, uplifting, and supportive of one’s personal and spiritual life. But if that is to be true for everyone then, in whatever way is most appropriate for their situation and capability, everyone must play their part.

In all voluntary organisations, and religious ones are no exception, the burdens can (and usually do) sometimes fall too heavily on the willing few. But a community where we all do something – however modest it may seem – appropriate to our ability and situation, is a much livelier, healthier, and more stimulating place than one where this is not the case. This Meeting is a community where willing people play their parts in keeping it vital and welcoming, but that doesn't mean that more could not be done by more of us.

Simple things like doing a reading, lighting the chalice, arranging the flowers, and making coffee after service, all enhance our Sunday morning worship and fellowship. And contributing to worship – indeed, arranging and conducting worship – are likely to become all the more necessary in the not-too-distant future. But this is not something to be dreaded! To *join with others* in taking responsibility for an act of worship – the core activity of this Meeting – can and should be a rewarding and enjoyable activity, one in which those hidden 'gifts of the Spirit' are discovered and deployed. And it is in sharing all manner of tasks that the community's spirit is made manifest, transforming what might appear to be a chore into something enriching, something to be enjoyed.

There are actually so many ways to contribute the life of this Meeting, far from all of them directly related to our Sunday worship, that they cannot be listed here. So many ways to join in making this community more loving and caring, more outward-looking and spiritually dynamic, more able to project its message and values into the wider world, than it already is.

To be a member here is to be a part of all this, whatever the contribution that one makes, whatever the skills, interests, and ideas that one adds to the mix. And that includes just being here!

We are one body sharing one Spirit, one shared commitment to the values we have reaffirmed here today. May each of us, as members of the one body, 'feel the same concern for one another', that Paul spoke of. And, as he puts it: "If one part suffers, we all suffer together; if one flourishes, all rejoice together." (*1 Corinthians 12: 36*). May it be so!

The Rev Clifford M. Reed is minister at Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House in Suffolk.

- *This sermon was given at a Membership Service for Ipswich Unitarians on 29th January 2012.*

** It is often alleged that Paul was hostile towards women and their participation, on an equal basis with men, in worship and in church life. In fact this was not so. Notorious texts, like 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, are almost certainly not the work of Paul and were added later by other hands at a time when the radical equality of the first Christian communities was giving way to the less enlightened norms of Greek and Roman society. We have been living with the consequences ever since!*

Is there truth in the Trinity?

Last year on Trinity Sunday, the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship re-published an article by veteran US minister *Carl Scovell*. His defence of trinitarian understandings retains a freshness, despite first appearing almost 40 years ago.

*If God is Three
And three's a crowd,
Then only One
Can be allowed.
If God is One
and one's alone,
Then how can God
Come to his own?
If One is Three
Where's unity?
If three is One,
Then where's the fun?
But if God's free,
He might be three,
Or one, or four,
Or less, or more.
We keep on counting;
He keeps the score.*

I suppose the question will arise: 'Why discuss the Trinity anyway?' Who cares? Who is going to lose sleep over it? Does it make the slightest difference to the couples wandering in the park, to the politicians, or to the ballplayers on the athletic field? Does it really interest anyone who attends church nowadays – Unitarian or otherwise?

I asked myself this question a dozen times as I poured over Scripture and the church fathers. And the deeper I got into this doctrine, the more I read and scribbled, the more I encountered ideas and interpretations which ran headlong into each other, the more urgently did this question press itself upon me, until I realised that I was not looking for an answer, for a new doctrine or an old doctrine, but for a question. I was looking for the question which prompted 400 years of profound, serious and sustained theological inquiry and debate, four centuries of history which have been summarily dismissed by many Christians and virtually all Unitarians as logic-chopping and vain speculation.

Yet we seek for the questions which will illuminate our faith. The issues which faced the church fathers during the first three centuries AD are here today, but they are badly put and badly argued. This is not surprising, for theology is hard and desperately unrewarding work. It is easier to spend one's time in committee meetings. But what the church – laity

and clergy alike – needs today is clarity. We need to understand the promise that has been given to us. We need to know what is asked of us and what we have a right to ask. It is, therefore, not only proper but essential that we look at the church doctrines which we have so smoothly and arrogantly passed over before – and one of these is the doctrine of the Trinity. And if we need to go beyond the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, we need also to go beyond William Ellery Channing’s 1819 Baltimore sermon on Unitarian Christianity.

The case for trinitarianism

In that sermon, Channing articulated the principal arguments against the Trinity which Unitarians have raised throughout Christian history. He said quite simply that the doctrine of the Trinity could not be found in the Bible. It was the same argument used by Michael Servetus 300 years before and by Arius 1200 years before that. Channing wanted to go back to the simple religion of Jesus as he saw it in the Gospels, and to bypass all the seemingly useless theological wrangling that followed.

And there’s much to be said for Channing’s side. The New Testament doesn’t ever use the word ‘trinity’. Tertullian coined it in the third century. Jesus refers to God as his father, says he must obey his father, return to his father, and so forth. He clearly subordinates himself to God. But what most Unitarians miss in the New Testament is the way in which Jesus identifies his work with God’s work and his will with God’s

will (*John 14:1-11*). “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.” “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” “Know you not,” he says to Phillip, who has asked him for a big display of miracles, “know you not that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” This echoes the faith of the early church. “God was in Christ,” says Paul, “reconciling the world to Himself.” (*2 Cor 5:19*). And again: “For if there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (*1 Cor 8:6*). The New Testament may not teach the Trinity, but it surely seems to pave the way for the idea of the Trinity. The texts just cited are simply ignored by most Unitarians when they talk about going back to that ‘simple religion of Jesus’.



Angels at Mamre (Holy Trinity) by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430). The icon aims to illustrate the mystery of the Trinity. (Wikipedia, Public Domain, including the US).

It is necessary to realise that Jesus’ ministry *per se* did not make a tremendous impact on the world while he was alive. His impact came after he died, in the events which we call the Resurrection. He came alive in the remembering, in the reliving of his life, by those

who felt his impact in a way that they did not seem to when he was alive and with them. In a sense, he was more alive after he died, alive to those who were so struck by him that now they did not quite know what to do with their traditional Father-God. Jesus now seemed more real to them. They knew Jesus had taught them of the Father-God, but he seemed so much more vital than the God of tradition – until it occurred to them that the reason he seemed so real was that it was this God who was with him and in him and through him, and through him, was now with them. Emmanuel – God-with-us – came true in Jesus Christ. This, I submit, was the early Christian's experience of God.

The question which the early church was trying to answer was: How is God with us? And the church answered it by saying, "He is with us through Christ, God's spirit now moving and speaking in our church, among us, present in our hymns and prayers and preaching and in the breaking of bread." No, this in itself does not create a doctrine of the Trinity, but it is clear that the Christian experience was moving in that direction.

The Council of Nicaea

I will not attempt to describe here the two centuries of debate that preceded the Council of Nicaea. What the Council decided in 325 AD was that the Son of God was not an angel, nor a creature like other creatures, but was derived from the very essence of God Himself. Christ was "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God; being of one substance (homo-ousios) with the Father."

Now of course the Council of Nicaea was a highly politicised event. It was called by the Emperor, Constantine, in order to bring about theological unity in his empire. He paid the expenses of the 318 bishops who attended, and it is likely that he neither understood nor really cared much about the arguments that filled the air. What he wanted was a unified statement of belief, and he got it. Only two of the bishops who attended the Council – one of them Arius, a proto-Unitarian – refused to sign it.

I am convinced that certain benefits resulted from this decision. The trinitarian style of thinking preserved both the majesty of God and his proximity to his children, asserting both his mystery and his love, without compromising either. The trinitarian style of thinking kept a certain motion or dynamic in the centre of God. There is a church in Constantinople (Istanbul) which has a mosaic depicting God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit dancing with each other hand in hand. Motion is essential to an understanding of God, unless you prefer to see God as a big clockmaker who winds up the clock and then goes to sleep.

But the political atmosphere of Nicaea and the harshly dogmatic debates turned Christianity into a religion of propositions which one either assents to or denies. I can appreciate the (small t) trinitarian style of thinking, but hardening this into the formula of (capital T) Trinity has hurt the Christian faith.

Servetus and afterwards

It was up to Michael Servetus 1206 years after Nicaea, to raise this question again when he published *On the Errors of the Trinity* in 1531. In this work, written in the midst of

Protestant and Catholic inquisitions, Servetus affirmed that the Bible teaches the Father is supreme, the Son is co-eternal with the Father but subordinate to him, and that the Son can save mankind without being equal to the Father. For these heresies Servetus was executed in 1553, but his ideas travelled across Europe and eventually reached England, where in 1714 a young minister named Samuel Clarke, Rector of St. James Church in Piccadilly, wrote a book that might have come from the pen of Servetus himself. It was called *On the Scriptural Doctrine of the Trinity*, and, with 1,250 Scriptural citations, attempted to prove exactly what Servetus had said.

Just before his death, Samuel Clarke amended *The Book of Common Prayer*, removing the prayers to Christ and the Athanasian Creed, and substituting Scriptural doxologies for the Gloria Patri. It was this revision of the Service of Morning Prayer which 55 years later became the basis for James Freeman's revision of the prayerbook at King's Chapel in Boston. The prayerbook now used in King's Chapel, therefore, contains the classical Unitarian Christian theological position. The prayerbook protects this position and makes possible its enunciation every Sunday.

From Unitarian Christianity to Humanism

At one time Unitarian Christianity was the theological position of every American Unitarian church. Now it is the position of relatively few Unitarians, and those few are dwindling. There is a reason for this. Unitarian Christianity has sought simplicity. Simplicity is fine, but simplicity has its dangers. It tends to become a religion of that which is intellectually the easiest to grasp, and of what feels to be true at the moment. Furthermore, one God without dynamics and without a mediator becomes either the unmoved Never, utterly transcendent and remote from man, or else becomes solely the Father God, so anthropomorphic that he ceases to be believable as God. For example, the God whom Channing described in his Baltimore Sermon sounds for all the world like a benevolent New England merchant. Very anthropomorphic.

In this Unitarian Christianity, God becomes either too remote or too close, but in either case the same result ensues. Man takes God's place. Unchecked Unitarianism then leads to Humanism. As the poet Robert Frost aptly put it in a passage in his *Masque of Mercy* (describing a bookstore owner named Keeper):

*Keeper's the kind of Unitarian
Who having by elimination got
From many gods to Three, and Three to One,
Thinks why not taper off to none at all,
Except as father putative to sort of
Legitimize the brotherhood of man,
So we can hang together in a strike.*

Intellectual positions do have consequences: what has happened to American Unitarianism is no accident. And what is amazing is how much mysticism and God-talk and orthodox hymnology still remain in Unitarian churches – a witness to the spiritual hunger of the human heart.

The church in a godless world

If then, we are to go beyond Nicaea, we must also go beyond Channing. We cannot go back to what is called ‘the simple religion of Jesus’. It is just not available to us, and, after all, Christian faith is the response to Jesus; it is in fact the religion about Jesus, and there is no escaping this.

But we must begin where we are – in an essentially godless world, a world that gets along by-and-large without a sense of God and probably will do so indefinitely. Yet we are a special community – we who call ourselves Christians. We have elected to stand within the promise that God is with us. By being members of the Christian church we assume that somehow this promise is true, although we do not understand how. In fact, our question is the same one the church fathers asked so many centuries ago: “How is God with us? What does it mean – to be in Christ? How can Christ be close to us and yet remain still God in all His, or Its, mystery?” I believe that if we have the courage to ask these questions, God in his time and in his ways will answer us.

The Rev Carl Scovell is Minister Emeritus of King’s Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts, and a recipient of the Unitarian Universalist Association distinguished service award.

- *This article first appeared in the Summer 1973 edition of The UU Christian Journal. We re-publish it, with the permission of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship, because of its relevance to our own continuing conversations about the doctrine of the Trinity.*



King’s Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts, which describes itself as ‘Unitarian Christian in theology, Anglican in worship, and Congregational in governance’. Photo: chensiyuan. (GNU Free Documentation Licence).

PRAYER AND POEM

By Brinley Price

Prayer

Eternal Life, the hub and rim
Of the wheel of birth and death,
The No-thing and the All,
The Stillness and the Breath;

'Unite' in Universe,
'Create' in the Creation,
Reached by the inner eye,
Beyond sensation;

You who are the Fire,
Its Life, Light, Heat,
Make us like You,
Make us complete;

O You within each thing,
Who are less far
Than our own minds and hearts,
Who are what we truly are;

Bring us to You
When our turning has to cease
And when at death, we cease to die
Be our undying peace;

And be the infinite Sea
Into which we raindrops fall,
We waves break, icebergs melt,
You that hears, and are our call.

Poem: Grace

Now my eternal being matters more
To me than my mere earthly transient name,
I rest upon that ground, within that core.

I want no longer the false light of fame,
But know I am already and am loved
For this already beyond my guilt and shame.

I need not move myself since I am moved,
The One Life flowing into me and through
And by my openness to this am proved.

Nor need I prove myself to me or you,
Nor must achieve this birth that is achieved
In me, through me, this making ever new.

For all that is needed is to have received,
Not have refused, the light, breath, stream to grow
And move and live; to have in Grace believed.

And so I rest below Your swaying bough,
Your sighing glowing leaves, Eternal Now.

Brinley Price is a member of St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York, and of the Unitarian Christian Association.

Poem: Thoughts on Notice-board words, Bournemouth Unitarian Church

By George de Gay

‘In Things Essential Unity’,
That’s counsel we should heed!
Folk must support a common goal,
For ventures to succeed.

The precepts of our common faith,
Give us our unity,
‘To worship God with heart and mind,
And serve humanity’.

‘In What is Doubtful, Liberty’,
A saying that is sound!
We should respect each other’s thoughts,
Where matters are profound.

For many are the areas,
Where no one knows for sure,
What is true and what is false.
Where everything’s obscure.

‘In All Things Practise Charity’.
A holy thought is this! ,
And it’s the glory of our faith,
To give it emphasis.

Wise words of Jesus are our guide,
But truth’s not ours alone,
Folk come to it in many ways.
Let love to all be shown.

So, unity we must maintain,
Maintain or cease to be.
Still Liberty let us uphold,
And live in Charity.

**George de Gay is a member of the Unitarian Christian Association,
who now lives in Newbury, Berkshire.**

THE FREE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

From Discourse on the Church (1841), by William Ellery Channing.

I belong to the Universal Church; nothing shall separate me from it. In saying this, however, I am no enemy to particular churches. In the present age of the world, it is perhaps best that those who agree in theological opinions should worship together; and I do not object to the union of several such churches in one denomination, provided that all sectarian and narrow feeling be conscientiously and scrupulously re-sisted. I look on the various churches of Christendom with no feelings of enmity ...

The Romish church is illustrated by great names. Her gloomy convents have often been brightened by fervent love to God and man. Her St. Louis, and Fenelon, and Massillon, and Cheverus; her missionaries, who have carried Christianity to the ends of the earth; her sisters of charity, who have carried relief and solace to the most hopeless want and pain, do not these teach us that in the Romish church the Spirit of God has found a home? How much, too, have other churches to boast! In the English church we meet the names of Latimer, Hooker, Barrow, Leighton, Berkeley and Heber; in the Dissenting Calvinistic church, Baxter, Howe, Watts, Doddridge, and Robert Hall: among the Quakers, George Fox, William Penn, Robert Barclay, and our own Anthony Benezet, and John Woolman; in the Anti-trinitarian church, John Milton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, Price, and Priestley.

To repeat these names does the heart good. They breathe a fragrance through the common air. They lift up the whole race to which they belonged. With the churches of which they were pillars or chief ornaments I have many sympathies; nor do I condemn the union of ourselves to these or any other churches whose doctrines we approve, provided that we do it without severing ourselves in the least from the universal church. On this point we cannot be too earnest. We must shun the spirit of sectarianism as from hell. We must shudder at the thought of shutting up God in any denomination. We must think no man the better for belonging to our communion; no man the worse for belonging to another. We must look with undiminished joy on goodness, though it shine forth from the most adverse sect. Christ's spirit must be equally dear and honored, no matter where manifested. To confine God's love or his good Spirit to any party, sect, or name, is to sin against the fundamental law of the kingdom of God, to break that living bond with Christ's universal church which is one of our chief helps to perfection.

From the website of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, Cheshire:

... Brook Street Chapel is a creedless church. We agree to differ while remaining united in friendship, fellowship and faith. Many of us are liberal Trinitarians, a large number are traditional Unitarians, and a few refuse any label. We believe that there are many different ways to God.

As a community of friends, we welcome friends and visitors alike in these words: *In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of humanity. We invite you to worship with us.*

What is the UCA?

The Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) was formed in 1991 to preserve and strengthen the liberal Christian tradition within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in Britain. We aim to be that place where this tradition can be explored, while at the same time providing a resource for the denomination as a whole.

We see ourselves as heirs to the Unitarian Christian *and* the Free Christian traditions of our forebears. The Free Christians were those who sought to bring together Unitarians, Trinitarians and those rejecting such labels, in a creedless church. We seek to renew and revitalise these traditions, to create a vibrant faith for the 21st Century.

The UCA organises events each year at different places around Britain to reflect the geographic spread of the membership. All members and friends are welcome to join us on these occasions. We also aim to hold a Retreat each year, again open to all.

We publish a twice-yearly journal *The Liberal Christian Herald*, as well as Newsletters for members. In 2007, we produced a book for daily prayer and group worship, *Daybreak and Eventide*, and in 2009 we published *The Man They Called The Christ* by David Doel.

The Unitarian Christian Association is an affiliated society of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Each year, the UCA makes a significant book grant to all first-year ministry students (at both Manchester and Oxford).

The UCA has grown steadily in recent years and individual membership stands at over 160. However, we are aware that we represent many more than this number. In the biggest opinion survey of recent times (in 2004), our General Assembly found that more than 60 per cent of members described their theology as 'liberal Christian' (*Inquirer*, 29/05/2004).

We welcome new members from all who want to preserve the liberal Christian tradition within our denomination.

Apart from individual members, 15 congregations in Britain are affiliated to the UCA, as is the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (a church with strong historic links to our denomination).

The following congregations in Britain are formally affiliated to the UCA:

Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford
The Memorial Church, Cambridge
Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow
Dob Lane Chapel, Failsworth
Effra Road Chapel, Brixton
Flowery Field Chapel, Hyde
Halliwell Road Free Church, Bolton
Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross

Manchester College Oxford Chapel Society
Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds
Nazareth Chapel, Padiham
Norcliffe Chapel, Styal
Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead
Stalybridge Unitarian Church
Williamson Memorial Unitarian
Christian Church, Dundee

Denominational affiliate: The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

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Individual membership £12	Joint membership £18
Concessions £8	Congregational membership £40
Individual life membership £120	Joint life membership £180
Members in EU countries £15	Outside the EU £20

Cheques payable to the Unitarian Christian Association
should be sent to Catherine Fozard,
20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 2LU.

**For non-UCA members, annual subscriptions to
The Herald cost £8 –
and individual copies may be ordered too.**

(The magazine currently comes out twice a year.)

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