

Are churches still much use?- 25th May 2014

At times our own light goes out
And is rekindled by a spark from another person.

Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude
Of those who have lighted the flame within us.

Albert Schweitzer

Daniele Hervieu-Leger is a French sociologist who wrote in 1993 quite a difficult book called “Religion as a Chain of Memory”. In less poetic words, what she means is that most religions are traditions, handed down from parents to children and that most people the world over take their religious beliefs and practices from their parents. It seems obvious. But she is also aware that today in Western Europe and increasingly in America this “Religion as a Chain of Memory” is no longer so and that in all the rest of an increasingly secular world it is swiftly becoming no longer so too. Like many people today I am very much aware that we have largely destroyed our own religious tradition. I have tested it to destruction myself and, as Unitarians, some, or even many, of you have too. So it often seems that, now that we have destroyed it, we are faced with a vast trackless desert without landmarks and that we are in a fearful place because there are none of the traditional shelters of our parents. It is, I believe, highly significant that the last chapter of Hervieu-Leger’s book is called “Post Traditional Society and the Future of Religious Institutions”.

Reading from Hervieu-Leger (p 165)

“The omnipresence of risk, (hence of uncertainty) is peculiar to modern societies. That massive exposure of risk is the result of globalisation which places the everyday life of each individual at the mercy of upheavals affecting society on a planetary scale. Deprived of the security of stable communities which supplied evidence of a code of meaning that was fixed once and for all, deprived too of the great universalist visions imparted by modernist ideologies, individuals are

adrift in a universe without fixed bearings. Their world is no longer one which they can construct together.“

For me a liberal religion is one that never poisons my imagination with thoughts and images designed to frighten me into submission to any power, material, human or imaginary. It is a religion which allows my thoughts to freely flow and allows me the opportunity to communicate freely with my fellow-travellers through this existence between birth and death. A liberal religion for me is a religion of possibilities rather than certainties, one of creativity and encouragement, appreciation and joy rather than one of negativity, discouragement punishment and even suppression. That is the only religion I am ultimately concerned about and my concern extends to the promotion and defence of any such an individual or organised institution, like a church, promoting it.. This concern waxes in importance away beyond any particular institutional vehicle of liberal religion, such as Quakers or Unitarians. These institutions may be vehicles of a liberal religion and, through that, of liberal spirituality but, as institutions with properties, governances and communities, they are, in my scale of values only good as long as they DO promote a liberal religion and if they fail to do that, they are not my ultimate concern.

So, for me, any liberal religion is free from authoritarian dogma and therefor from creeds and necessarily shared beliefs. True, that makes for a very loosely bound together community (the original classical Latin meaning of *religio* was ‘binding together’). Some people coming from more bound, and therefor maybe more united, religious communities will miss this when they reach the likes of us or the Quakers. Other people will be horrified that liberal religion,

as I have defined it for present purposes, gives up the role of assistant in social control. No longer will people be terrified into being 'good' or 'properly submissive' or even 'moral' if such a liberal religion prevails.

James Luther Adams, the premier Unitarian theologian of the last century writes that what he called 'the Left Wing of the Reformation' "rejected the notion of hierarchy, demanded the separation of church and state and appealed to belief in the freedom of the spirit – "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth" – to create new forms of community". He points out that the church 'is a lay church not controlled by "officials". Every child of God has the guidance of conscience, for the Holy Spirit is available to every child of God.' In this fellowship, strictly of equals, there was a covenant between people and under God. 'Variety was seen as the law of creation, truth to emerge in the battle of ideas among free persons in free communities.'

So, perhaps we are free from but free for what?

Free from but free for what? Let us leave that question sticking to the wall for a while.

To understand the present position of churches, including the Unitarian church, it is essential to look at the social history of the late nineteen sixties, the seventies and eighties. So let us look at the loss of the numbers, the loss of the power influence of the churches, a loss that began to gather increasing speed in the 1960s. Calum Brown in his oral history, published in 2001 as "The Death of Christian Britain" collected many recordings from older people about religious and moral life in that era and published

them, with a fully evidenced analysis. This more rapid turning of the tide against institutional religion seems to have begun with the increasing loss of women.

I quote, beginning at page 128. “Clinging to or acquiring the status of being ‘a Christian’ was a sine qua non for most women between 1800 and 1950.” “Moral issues were inseparably linked, most often by mothers, to religious morality. This might be the simple avoidance of blasphemy and Sabbath desecration or it could be the avoidance of pregnancy out of wedlock. Winifred Foley recalled a ditty current among her peers which she said to herself when tempted by her first sexual encounter:

There was a young lady so wild
She kept herself pure undefiled
By thinking of Jesus
Venereal diseases
And the dangers of having a child.”

“Official ecclesiastical censures on female morality,” continues Brown, “were powerfully enforced by the roles of gossip, parental supervision and peer group pressure.” (p 135)

I continue to quote Callum Brown’s oral social history. “The late 1940’s and 1950s saw the greatest church growth that Britain had experienced since the mid-nineteenth century.” “Working women were targeted for feelings of guilt at neglecting their children. The

dominant traditional view was that women's main purpose was to return home and create a domestic haven. Religious revivals spread across Britain aided by new technology and new forms. The Billy Graham crusades of 1954-1956 produced mass audiences in football stadia, military barracks and huge additions (to numbers watching and listening) on closed circuit television and radio." "There was a rigid censorship of the theatre and of literature. The radio and television were ruled monolithically by the elitist culture of Lord Reith. Order, duty, thrift and respectability reigned supreme."

"Then in the 1960s came the collapse of the censorship of literature (1960) and the theatre (1968), the legalisation of abortion (1967) and homosexuality (1967) easier divorce (1969), the emergence of the women's liberation movement (from 1968) and the flourishing of pop music (especially from 1962). The old fears of hell and unwanted pregnancy gave way to new ones." "But above all, the immediate victim was a Christianity that was tied up in feminine piety. Femininity was recrafted. The magazines for teen age girls which delivered a traditional moral discourse on female virtues failed and were wound up but the ones which focused on pop songs, "love" and "happiness" without mentioning domesticity, sexual virtue as rigid abstention, family, religion or respectability flourished."

"Later magazines for adult women went much the same way beginning with SHE and reaching a breakthrough with Cosmopolitan (founded 1972). With the Beatles in 1962 and 1963 came the pop concert and unprecedented female adulation. Over the next three years the pop record, the pirate radio station, the pop

magazine, the miniskirt, pop art and recreational drug use combined to create an integrated cultural system which swept the young people of Britain. Pop music became the vehicle of quasi religious thought, dealing with mysticism, pacifism, drugs, existentialism and nihilism.

The Moral Welfare Committee of the general assembly of the Church of Scotland in its report in 1970 in a single sentence grasped the central issue. “It is the promiscuous girl who is the real problem here”. In this utterly sexist statement the Committee actually understood the central issue – that the ‘moral turn’ in female sexuality destroyed the entire house of cards. Boys had always been boys but female permissiveness meant that a generation of young women were turning their backs on the discourse of pious femininity.” And their children would know nothing of the Christian culture of the preceding centuries. “

Many of us lived through those changes and I think we can now see quite clearly that truly, this was the beginning of “The Death of Christian Britain” as the title of Calum Brown’s book says.

That cohort of women leaving the church left with an impression of a censorious sexually-inhibiting kill-joy group of people who sought to limit their happiness and that impression has not been forgotten yet, even among their children. Sadly the churches of today are still living with the reputation of yesterday and in many cases it is still deserved. Churches may have changed and Liberal

religious institutions like Unitarians and Quakers may BE different but sadly we are not SEEN as any different. Having alienated at least one and probably three generations, liberal religion, along with the illiberal ones, is in an unprecedented place. What Hervieu-Leger recognizes as religion as what she calls a chain of memories, as a powerful tradition is probably irretrievably broken. But the NEED for liberal religion is no less.

So after increasing numbers of women gained control of their reproductive systems and lost their fear of unplanned pregnancies, the steady decline continues. Some prominent figures in the Church of Scotland were predicting that, at current rates of decline, apart from in a few isolated wealthy parishes, the church would close its doors in 2033. The Catholic Church in Scotland has been hit hardest. Recently many churches in the West are either losing half their priests or actually closing down.

Of course the Glasgow Unitarian Church was almost certainly hit badly too. George Paxton tells me, without verifying it from any records, that the membership was at a high point of 80 for a year or two at the beginning of the 1960s (about the time of Callum Brown's calculations of the high point of church membership in the land). By the 1990s when I first knew it, membership was around 30-35 and I remember coming across data which indicated that it had not changed up or down by more than four or five members for some two decades before that. So by comparison with the more conservative churches, we and certainly the Quakers have actually done quite well.

But in the land as a whole, are we seeing the gradual end of churches as significant and powerful institutions?

Is a church still the best vehicle for the promotion of liberal religion and spirituality? I ask this question on all seriousness because I am not at all sure what the answer is. Are we going to end like the Cornish Language Society which finally met once a year for an occasion at which four aged and infirm fluent speakers conversed with other for a few hours? Will we be like some society which meets to sing the old soldier's songs from the Boer War?

Although the coming of the pill and the freeing of women in the 60s and 70s seems to have led to a marked speeding in the decline in the attendance and membership of churches, the decline had, of course, begun before that, interrupted only by the sharp spike in attendance in the 1950s that Brown noted. Perhaps a look at the uses of churches before 1960 would also be quite helpful in understanding our decline.

So, what useful social roles did churches play that attracted people to them in the 1950s?

- They were self-consciously a vehicle of the authority of scripture and tradition as interpreted by a trained and ordained minister, an authority which claimed to set landmarks and compasses for life and to give a common meaning to existence, not just an emotional security blanket**

but also an inspiration for action. We know that, for many reasons well explored in this church, this cannot be the same today

- They were a vehicle for moral education teaching “right from wrong” as my grandmother would say, through admonitions, stories and parables and the examples and teachings of ministers and elders. This may still be so but today they are faintly heard in a cacophony of soaps, TV plays, newspaper headlines, womens’ journals and opinion columns.
- They were channels for organising social and moral activism. They were often overtaken in that role political parties and now even the parties are frequently overtaken by specialist pressure groups
- They had been of huge importance in the education of the poor through their Sunday Schools were often the vehicle of basic literacy before the Education Act 1872 but following the Education Act of 1944 their importance in that role has almost disappeared
- They were an important arm of Social Welfare with a poor fund (my father had £3000.00 in a large church at his disposal in the 1950s, perhaps £750,000.00 in today’s money). They are now mostly redundant while the welfare state is still functional or until everyone needs food banks
- There were a community and arts centre, staging plays and concerts promoting music and painting. They still function

like that sometimes in rural areas and in large churches in the city centre

- They were a kind of job centre where you might meet important people who could advance your career. Now we have real specialist job centres and internet organisations like Linked-in
- They were a dating agency for safe partners approved by parents. The internet is the dating and mate-selection arena now
- Perhaps they were a low level news and gossip channel. This is perhaps still so, at least in rural areas. But we have Facebook and Twitter now
- Perhaps they were a lonely hearts club where people not looking for a mate could have meet-ups and share teas, coffees, cakes and chat and not be alone at Christmas. Maybe this still works in some churches more than others
- And they often functioned as a kind of wishing well – prayers might sometimes appear to be answered. For a church that no longer ostensibly believes in petitionary prayer this is mostly lost now but people can still share wishes and longings

So an awful lot of what drew people to churches is no longer very important.

But the real business of a church is, or should be, Worship and Spiritual Development. All the rest are sidelines and accretions that once did bring in people but have little pulling power now.

Even now, all across the world, but spearheaded in Europe and North America, the social world is rapidly changing. The really important communities in any person's life are becoming less and less face to face living in the same neighbourhood. When I moved in from a village where I knew most people to a city my friends and people important to me became spread all over the city. As I researched psychology they even became spread all over the world and I only met up with them occasionally. Now most people have many friends they have never met. The internet is the parish pump.

This has seriously affected churches with buildings as gathering places. Most members no longer live within easy travelling distance. The parish concept began disappearing long ago. For a minority interest like Unitarianism good transport connections and parking in a city centre has long been best. More, the next generation lives increasingly on the internet and in a virtual world where reality only meets up by arrangement. The parish, the leader and the community have given way to the internet but our thinking and organisation has not caught up with the times. Are we a fit vehicle for the development of liberal religion?

Well, I would suggest we COULD be – ALMOST.

As is now quite well known here, I seriously doubt that thinking in terms of a parish, or of face to face propinquity, or a single leader, or, even, to begin with, a face to face church such as we have, are, any of them, the most important ingredients in the answers to my serious question. I am not even sure that the growth of this church is our first goal. Why?

Because we live in startling different times than when all these would have been important. Now, I am not suggesting that we all just give up our church and turn the capital over to the SUA as the constitution says.

No, I am deeply impressed with my grandchildren's present behaviour, even in primary school. Sharing a single computer, my daughter and her partner tell me, was torture for the family. Now that the son and daughter have each their own access to the internet, peace reigns. They spend hours on their own with unseen others, very occasionally relating through Skype. We are in the age of relationships that seldom meet face to face, and perhaps, in the future, will meet only for reproduction and child rearing. You and I may think that is a tragedy but, for a few years, perhaps even for a few decades, that is a possibility we must be prepared to cope with.

Long before Facebook and Twitter, as an academic back in the 1990s, I used to spend many hours a week on the internet engrossed in what was then called a list. Based in and moderated from the centre of the USA, Americans, Australians, Brits and many others debated ideas and approaches to treatment in the study of addictions. You would post an idea and half a dozen people would respond. It was a rough place. People were savaged daily in a way that would never happen in a conference face to face. Only when I went to the USA and Canada did I meet up with some of these folk and it turned out to be a joy. So I confess that years later I have tended to ignore the social media because my first experiences of FaceBook and Twitter were so full of trivialities that that I did not want to know,

But I am about to do a U-turn. People are meeting friends and spending more time on their smart phones than in conversations. Parents are concerned about the amount of time their children are spending on computers, tablets and cell phones. Some churches in the USA have to ask their attenders to turn off their cell-phones before worship begins. We are increasingly living less in a face to face life and more a boxed-in selfie-taking, even self-obsessed or narcissistic life – the life of a twenty first century net-dweller. Even in the USA, which, for a while, seemed to remain church-going after the UK decline, church membership is now sharply declining and recent research shows not only that the rate of decline exactly parallels increasing use of the internet but also that even within church membership there is a sharp decline in those who believe in actually sitting in the pews.

So please bear with me a while as I try to begin analysing what relating on the internet might mean.

There are few, if any, pulpits on the internet. Authoritative deliveries of, or about, ancient sacred writings are seldom received in the same way as the people sitting in the pews of yesterday did, in silence. Of course if people want to find them they can look for them. In the real church buildings of the past with a captured audience, these authoritative statements may have been sometimes received in silent contradiction but on the internet they are most commonly open to comment and discussion now, even savage ‘flaming’ as we used to call it on my old academic discussions. The internet is not kind to religious dogma and, of course, this helps liberal religion.

Using the Internet, a religious believer can type a few words into a search engine and see all the best arguments against religion through the ages, whether by famous historical philosophers or modern atheist firebrands. If they're having doubts that they'd rather not confess to their minister, their parents or their town, there are whole online communities of nonbelievers where they can vent their frustration and commiserate with others going through the same struggles, all in safety and in anonymity. If they think their religion is unique and distinctive, the Internet makes it much easier for them to come across similarities in other religions from all over the world.

On the other hand the Internet is providing new tools for open minded spiritual seekers to use. There is such a variety of seekers and finders out there that one is reminded of the situation of the earliest days of Christianity when the newly-joined-up civilisations around the Mediterranean basin were awash with new ideas from all over the place. Spirituality and spiritual enquiry seems to be thriving, but not religious institutions. Unless traditional congregations with buildings can connect to where and how spirituality is thriving, they may be left behind and become obsolete during this cultural and technological shift. Blogs, e-letters, social media posts, videos, data management, Web conferencing, mobile apps — all are already used and familiar in the new world of the next generation of net-dwellers. All are trusted and relatively easy to learn. They make it possible for individuals and even churches, if they are cleverly organised, to reach people with immediacy and intensity.

One liberal religious enthusiast, who shall be nameless writes (on the internet, of course) “The digital era is the transcendence of the physical, taking us beyond our flesh and blood, spreading internet memes, and awakening a global consciousness of the healing power of the human family.” Once print did that kind of thing too for me, connecting me with fascinating people up and down the ages and around the world but it did it for a much smaller circle of contemporaries and with little or no two-way communication. It is the capacity for two-way communication that is the seriously addicting thing.

If the strongest emotional bond of communication between humans is touch, then, like the written word, the internet is a desert of touch. Visual and aural communications can be used with Skype and with You-Tube but most of the traffic on the net is still in a highly cerebral words only form. As one Pagan pointed out, this makes the sharing of religious experience by internet difficult, “if you have to switch your mobile on, connect it to your sharing companion, and turn on video, it makes the fantastic sunset or moonlight scene you want to share in the moment, a bit less magical.” The capacity for word-only communication to be flawed and misunderstood is legendary. The internet tries to get round this with emoticons (wee smiley faces, etc.) but this is clumsy compared to face to face communications where nuances in the voice and diction and fleeting flashes of facial expression, gestures and body-talk make it all more alive and openly genuine.

Nevertheless words can, as we well know, stir the imagination and rhythmical, even musical, skills with words alone can be powerfully emotive like lyrical prose and even poetry.

Anyone with a Wi-Fi signal can gain access to the largest publishing platform in the history of humanity but before we plunge in we need to remember that what we write is likely to be accessible for decades to anyone who wishes to find it. So think carefully before you rant and remind people constantly that we all develop and change in our thinking and believing and that if we did not, we would be intellectually and spiritually dead.

I would suggest we need a team who are willing to spend time reading Face Book for spirituality, not just Unitarian Face books but, much more important, reading other people's tweets, wading through all the trivialities without being distracted, and joining in, replying, maintaining conversations, expressing our appreciation of what other people say. If this can be done through a common shared website that is not labelled CHURCH but has a neutral hashtag, as the language of Twitter has it, it can be quite powerful. If half the people we communicate with are in California and never likely to darken the doors of our church – does it matter? We are still working for liberal spirituality and if some of them happen to be within visiting distance of the church, it is the quality of the discourse, even if it is international, that will attract them, not the nearness of the church

Caring for people can be done through the internet too. I used to belong to another international list called INFJ, the Meyers-Briggs Code for our personalities. There was a lot of caring going on in that group, both trans-Atlantic and even here in the UK where I more than once visited with a participant when passing. Church groups can do that too, although we have to be careful about confidentiality.

For a small church that cannot agree together on a communal social justice campaign we can make friends working together through the internet on net-based campaigns and tell our fellow warriors about our liberal religion

Then, when virtual relations have been established on the internet, meeting up with mutually chosen people can be a joy, as I found about twenty years ago. A 'real' relationship of spiritual development, once begun on the web, might be continued face to face in a 'real' church – although they would have to be warned about our funny ways like singing the hymns we so love. That would be much better than having people walk in off the street with no prior explanation or warning.

So what is freedom for ?

It is for celebrating life. Even the old Westminster Catechism can be translated as saying something like that. But, freedom for is also for us, the promotion of liberal spirituality. That means nurturing and promoting our deep understanding of our values and the engagement of them on our daily lives, stimulating and exploring together the wonderful varieties of religious experience and understandings, helping each other discover ourselves and become the best people we can be. (Incidentally, by that last suggestion I do NOT mean making a little pea-green paragon of excellence and narcissistic pride of each one of us.)

There is nothing rational about this. Like any response to a need to relieve suffering and promote happiness it could be a call to ministry for each one and every one of us. It may be something of God working within us or it may be us merely responding to some

blind urge to development as in a long history of evolution stretching from past into future.

But I believe that there is more than one way into the future of liberal spirituality and, perhaps, into a different future of religious institutions.

**O star of truth down shining
Through clouds of doubt and fear,
I ask but 'neath thy guidance
My pathway may appear:
However long the journey,
However hard it be,
Though I be lone and weary,
Lead on, I'll follow thee.**