AS OTHERS SEE US: WHAT'S IN A BLOG?

*AN ARTICLE* by a member of our congregation, published in the “Face to Faith” column of The Guardian on 28 March 2009, prompted about 50 responses on the newspaper’s blog. Roughly half were positive and half negative. Here is a selection.

*** Positive ***

“The world would clearly be a much happier place if all the doctrinaire dogmatists and fundamentalists were to become Unitarians.”

“I’ve often thought that if I believed in a god at all, this is probably the club worth joining. Or maybe the unitarians-without-hymns, the peaceable (though sadly abstemious!) Quakers. It’s hard to think of either body causing massive public outrage, the way the usual suspects manage to do several times a week.”

“Unitarians seem to be unique in explicitly recognising that they are not held together by intellectual consensus. Not only is there no creed, but there is no desire for a creed. What matters is the behaviour that shows where you have put your trust. When challenged over doctrine, a Unitarian will tend first to seek understanding and to withhold overt expressions of intellectual assent until the proposition has become clear. Ask me whether I believe the doctrine of the Trinity, and I will first respond by asking you to explain what it means. And if the finest teachers cannot do so, then we will just have to accept that I am too stupid to understand the doctrine, so any claim to believe it would be futile and dishonest on my part.”

“By rejecting explicit dogma and creeds, which become simply a set of written statements that act as a totem, Unitarians force internalisation of the difficult questions and drive one to the task of finding one’s own way to Truth. This inevitably becomes reflected in the way one chooses to live. Such a faith is in many respects a far harder taskmaster than simple credal faiths, for which reciting a set formula appears to suffice.”

“What is it that holds together the creedless Unitarians? They are full of differences, and yet they are mostly a cohesive unity. Perhaps it is simply that they are a collection of like-minded individuals whose common ground is a personally developed faith. I suppose that does demand they are self-confident free thinkers. In the modern age it is no wonder there are so few of them. Unitarianism is perhaps the religion that most deserves to prosper. “We believe in one God. We believe that Jesus was a good person, an excellent role-model, but not the son of God. God is God, and that’s that. You are responsible for your own actions. God will not judge you based on what you believe, but on what you do. Probably. We could be wrong.” This is the closest thing to a healthy religion I can think of: far more benevolent, not to mention sensible, than the abrahamic monotheisms.

*** Negative ***

“What it boils down to is that Unitarians want the warm fuzzies without the explicit codification of other superstitions. Now they only need to take one more step and become rationalists.”

“It seems to me that Unitarians are ex-Christians who have thrown out the baby (the Incarnation) and have kept the pantheist bathwater. In what essential way do they differ
from Muslims? Is their faith a cosier, friendlier, laissez-faire version of Islam?”

“A feather bed to catch a falling Christian” is how Erasmus Darwin described Unitarianism to his Unitarian friend Josiah Wedgwood (Charles Darwin’s paternal and maternal grandfathers respectively). It is a pity that the Unitarian Church in Britain has not gone as far as its sister Unitarian Universalist Association in North America in adopting a non-credal approach. There, a majority of members identify themselves as secular humanists, while remaining broad enough to include many who identify themselves as Wiccans, Earth Religionists, Buddhists, and so on, rather like Catherine’s heterogeneous congregation in Oxford. Only about 10 per cent of UUA members identify themselves as Christian. Though relatively small, they are, I believe, the fastest-growing denomination in the USA. Here where I live in Canada, my local Unitarian congregation (I am not a member) has had to move from its small church to one more than four times bigger in order to accommodate its growing numbers.”

“Hmm – I dunno much about Unitarians, but I know when people are afraid to call a spade a spade. If you don’t believe in a god, you call yourself atheist, agnostic, or secular humanist. If you believe that there is some transcendent force outside of mankind that influences our lives, you can be a Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist or any other theism. Unitarianism, it seems to me, is afraid to let go of its Christian origins. There’s nothing wrong with a communitarian movement that values self-respect and ethics and which judges all people according to their deeds rather than merely by their words or intentions. There is everything wrong with a philosophy in the 21st century that is deeply sceptical about the major monotheisms but can’t do without them.”