

# THE HERALD

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**Into the heart of Taizé, with Jeffrey Gould ... p5**

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Cover Photo: Taizé worship (Photo: Sabine Leutenegger / (c) Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France.)

## Editorial: What’s in a name?

A warm welcome to readers of this Spring edition of *The Herald*, and apologies for its irregular appearance of late. It will in future come out twice a year: in Spring and Autumn (while members will also continue to receive Newsletters).

You may notice a wider range of contributors than usual, including: Jim Robinson on six years of UK ministry; Tim Powell on Renaissance humanism; Yvonne Aburrow on the ‘Goddess’. Reviewers are Jean Bradley and Vernon Marshall – who pays fulsome tribute to a new book by David Doel, published by the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA).

Now an apology for returning to a subject that was the focus of the last Editorial: namely the question of a name-change for our denomination, which could result in dropping the ‘Free Christian’ part of our name. I’m doing so because it remains a ‘live’ issue, and also my last editorial encouraged two interesting – and divergent – responses, from Roger Booth and Stephen Lingwood (both included in this issue).

Roger Booth argues for maintaining a distinctive Free Christian identity, so that those in our denomination who believe in the Trinity, or those who ‘simply find the nature of the

Godhead a mystery’, should not feel alienated by our worship or ethos. I must say I believe the UCA does encompass both Free and Unitarian Christian perspectives, although there’s no harm in us being reminded of our Free Christian legacy (and our denomination certainly needs reminding!).

Stephen Lingwood, on the other hand, makes a powerful case that Unitarian Christians should not fear dropping the Free Christian name, and in fact should welcome this. He brings much-needed clarity to this debate by explaining what the terms actually mean. His main point is that the inclusive spirit of Free Christianity is now integral to our Unitarian movement, where all are welcome.

Obviously there’s room for debate here, but I feel this is often *not* the case. While we say we celebrate all faiths, and that we welcome people ‘of all faiths and none’, I feel there remains a hostility towards Christianity, certainly to ‘mainstream Christianity’.

Examples? Well, two from the South-East: a membership secretary a few years ago saw it as her duty to keep out ‘Trinitarians’ (and was supported in this by senior figures in the congregation); more recently, an active member at another chapel resigned because he felt his belief in the Trinity and the Resurrection (of Christ) made his continued membership impossible. And our national publicity often gives a purely Unitarian view of our theology (historically at any rate). Then just listen to the distaste (almost horror) in the voices of some Unitarians – including ministers – when they discuss mainstream Christian practices they’ve witnessed in some of our Free Christian chapels, and hear them assert (in the teeth of history): *‘it’s against all our traditions!’*

Of course, many in our denomination do not share this prejudice (or confusion), but I regularly encounter the belief that, whatever our views, one thing we are *all* against is the ‘dogmas’ of mainstream Christianity. Let’s be clear. Most Unitarians (and Free Christians) do oppose many of these ‘dogmas’, but that can never be the collective position of our denomination! In the end, our only *essential* difference from the Christian mainstream is that we are against the imposition of creeds on members and ministers. For our essence is we are a free religious faith, not that we have any collective position on the nature of the divine.

But does any of this matter today? I think it does. Why? Because it seems to me our best hope for growth – numerical and spiritual – is among liberal Christians disenchanted with narrow and fundamentalist attitudes in their own churches (including prejudice in the Church of England). We already attract a trickle of ‘refugees’ from these churches – who come to us, of course, for a wide variety of reasons. But even if this became a slightly faster trickle, it could have a dramatic effect on our small numbers!

So for this reason alone I support the retention of the ‘Free Christian’ name, as a reminder of that inclusive tradition that many of us are so hazy about. And I hope that both Unitarian and Free Christians will attend the workshop (on last year’s Resolutions) at our Annual Meetings in April, and join this debate.

But ultimately I agree with Stephen Lingwood: far more important than this is that we should deepen our Christian spirituality, and witness to ‘the transformative power of God in our lives’. That way we will create vibrant spiritual communities, ones capable of attracting newcomers – including liberal Christians of all kinds.

**Jim Corrigan is an Executive Committee member of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.**



***Are you interested in the liberal Christian tradition?  
Do you want to see it continue and flourish within our  
Unitarian denomination?***

***Have you considered joining the Unitarian Christian  
Association?***

***We welcome new members!***

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

# Moderator's Letter: Our living tradition

What do we mean by 'tradition'? The word has come to have some unfortunate connotations of fustiness, outdated views, a clinging on to the past. In fact it means a handing on down the generations, a transmission of culture, belief and practice. Jewish families hand on the traditions of Exodus, their delivery from slavery into freedom, in their Passover celebrations. Paul speaks of preaching the gospel, which he himself received and handed on in his turn (*I Corinthians Chapter 15*). This is a positive and joyful message, far removed from any notion of antiquarianism or a dull adherence to outmoded ways of thought.

A useful distinction made by some commentators is that between tradition and traditionalism. The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan phrased it thus: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.' The Unitarian ethos is one that embraces modernity. The Dissenting Academies were among the first to have lectures in English rather than in Latin. Unitarians were in the vanguard with other liberal Christians who embraced the insights of Darwin. They eagerly looked to the new Biblical criticism which arose in the nineteenth century. They looked to the study of faiths other than Christianity as yet another way in which humankind could approach knowledge of the divine and find self-knowledge as well.

The Unitarian Christian tradition looks to our roots, not only out of respect for the men and women who gave us the underpinnings of our religious and civil freedom but because it contains lessons and pointers to the future. We look to Jesus, the 'author and perfecter' of our faith, in the knowledge that he is a pivotal figure for people of other faiths, as well as those not affiliated to any faith. Our liberal, rational tradition prevents us from seeing him (or any faith system) as giving us easy answers to the mysteries of life but it gives us the opportunity to work out our response to life in loving community with others.

*The Herald* presents us as always with different viewpoints and outlooks on the religious quest. In a world where cynicism and despair often predominate, the Unitarian Christian Association seeks to offer a ray of light and love to those who wish to join us in the quest for faith without the loss of freedom. Whether you are a UCA member, a friend or simply a curious enquirer, we welcome you.

**The Rev Alex Bradley is Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association and Principal of Unitarian College Manchester. He is Minister at Styal in Cheshire.**



# Revelation in the rhythms of Taizé

A week-long return visit to the monastic community of Taizé in France, enabled *Jeffrey Gould* to savour its deep spirituality

For one week in November 2009, Catherine Fozard and I, along with two other friends, immersed ourselves in the rhythm of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé, which exists in a ‘campus’ setting within a tiny hill-top village in the region of Burgundy, France.

We had been for a four-day visit in 2007, and felt that a longer stay would enable us to benefit more fully from the discipline of attending three daily acts of worship, meeting people of all ages from different nations and religious traditions, and having time to focus on our own spiritual needs. We were grateful to have this opportunity to delve more deeply into the life of this amazing community, whose ethos and style of worship have influenced Christians across the globe.

One major difference between our first visit and our second was that we chose to hire a cottage in the village, and not stay in the rather Spartan accommodation provided by the community. This proved to be a wise choice, as we were able to cater for ourselves, and enjoy a considerably higher level of comfort. Whilst this might seem antithetical to Taizé’s ethics of simplicity and community, it had become necessary for both of us to have access to hot drinks (with caffeine!) and comfortable beds, in order to benefit from the more spiritual aspects of the total experience.



GLOBAL VILLAGE: *The Church in Taizé rises high.*

**Photo:** Catherine Fozard

The longer period of our visit also enabled us to engage at a deeper level in the meditative nature of the worship services, which are structured around a biblical text, a long period of silence, and about 30 minutes of simple, repetitive chants. It can take as much as a week before one learns which physical position is most beneficial in prayer (upright on a bench; kneeling on a prayer stool; sitting cross-legged on the floor). One feels less of a transient visitor, and more of a legitimate pilgrim, when singing and praying so frequently in the company of the professed members of the community.

It was a pleasant surprise to come across a young English lady staffing the community's bookshop and craft store, who had left her native town of Marple (near Stockport) in order to join a French-speaking, female order that supports the work of the brothers of Taizé. Catherine Fozard had taught in the same secondary school the sister had attended, and they knew students and teachers in common. It is precisely that sort of unexpected encounter that marks a visit to Taizé, in that coincidences and revelations can occur with alarming frequency.

The community began in the early days of the Second World War, when the French-speaking, Swiss Protestant Brother Roger established a house of shelter for Jewish and political refugees who were escaping the clutches of the Nazis. He was soon joined by other men of faith, who were attracted to a simple life of prayer and self-financing physical labour. The ecumenical nature of the community grew in time to appeal to large numbers of visiting adolescents, who identify with the ministry of reconciliation that is embodied in the hospitality offered by the brothers.

Today, thousands of pilgrims visit the small village in the French countryside, hoping to experience a unique form of worship, and observe how a community of international dimensions achieves peace and unity, without sacrificing the gifts of each individual.

It is possible to make a pilgrimage to Taizé as part of an organized group, or to plan a private period of residence, in either the community or in the village. I suggest that you investigate the community's website for further information ([www.taize.fr](http://www.taize.fr)), and be alert to Taizé worship services in your own area, held in churches of all denominations. Attending such gatherings will provide a genuine taste of what this special community offers anyone who is willing to explore its riches.

**The Rev Jeffrey Gould is Minister at Bury, and Events Officer for the UCA. He is Chair of the General Assembly's Faith and Public Issues Commission.**



# The heart of Renaissance optimism

*Tim Powell* considers the legacy of a great Renaissance figure, Leon Battista Alberti, who showed how reason and humanism could combine with Christianity

At the Unitarian Meeting House where I worship in south Gloucestershire, the Sunday morning services open with the chalice lighting to the following affirmation:

*We meet together today not for schismatical or heretical separation, not as a source of bigotry and superstition, but for principles quite the reverse: for promoting pure religion, the glory of God, and the happiness of humankind.*

These words are taken from the lengthy inscription on the foundation stone of the meeting house, built in 1752, which declared that it was erected for promoting pure religion, the glory of God, and the happiness of mankind.

The ‘happiness of mankind’ is an unusual phrase to find on a church’s foundation stone and it is there because it was built as a Unitarian place of worship. In mainstream Christian understanding, the happiness of mankind was not then, and indeed one could argue, is often still not, a priority.

The idea of the happiness of mankind (or humankind as we would say nowadays) brings to mind the American Declaration of Independence in which the pursuit of happiness is one of the three rights of all people, along with life and liberty. This similarity with the Marshfield declaration is not coincidental. The common source of the idea that seeking human happiness is a worthy ideal was probably the philosopher John Locke’s 1690 essay *Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he wrote that the necessity of pursuing true happiness is the foundation of liberty.

The highest intellectual activity was therefore the careful and constant pursuit of true happiness, for once we have identified the cause of enduring happiness, the stronger the commitment we have to its pursuit, and the more are we free from being led hither and thither by any passing whim or fancy, or by false ideas. In this, Locke was following classical Greek ethics in which *eudaimonia*, happiness, is linked to *aretê*, the virtue or excellence. Aristotle was only the most famous philosopher to observe that while it was all very well stressing the importance of virtue, a more common motive for action was the pursuit of happiness. He therefore sought to see how happiness and virtue could be linked.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote, ‘the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action’. Happiness, he argued, is not equivalent to wealth, honour or pleasure, for it is an end in itself. So John Locke, and from him the author of the Marshfield foundation stone, were invoking the Greek philosophical tradition in which happiness is bound up with the civic virtues of courage, moderation and justice. Because they are civic virtues, not just personal attributes, the pursuit of happiness is not merely a matter of achieving individual gratification. It is more than hedonism.

However, between ancient Greece and John Locke is another stage of transmission, the humanism of the Renaissance. The Renaissance began in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Italy with the rediscovery of classical texts and, perhaps more importantly, the rediscovery of a tradition of open intellectual enquiry that flowed from the investigation of them. Classical texts in the fields of mathematics, architecture and engineering were particularly significant because their practical applications demonstrated the deep and profound learning of the civilisation from which they came.

The same classical tradition advanced ethical and philosophical views that had a very different notion of humanity from that of mediaeval Christianity. One could not read the writings of the classical authors, of all schools, without seeing that they saw a human being not as a hopeless supplicant on God's grace or a worthless sinner, but as a creative being with the potential for greatness. The philosophical and ethical wisdom of a civilisation that had produced mathematical genius, greatness in architecture and artistic works of undeniable beauty, had to be taken seriously.

It is through the revival of classical learning that we see a rediscovery of the worth of humanity. Humanity - with all its potential - became the centre of interest. It has been said that mediaeval thinkers philosophised on their knees but, bolstered by the new studies, Renaissance thinkers dared to stand up and rise to full stature, even producing the first critical historical studies of religious texts. So the reference to happiness in the Marshfield foundation stone reminds us that while Unitarianism was born as a child of the Enlightenment, it was conceived in Renaissance humanism. This strand of our tradition is extremely significant and its value is not confined to those within our movement who nowadays call themselves humanists – usually meaning of course, secular humanists – nor is it confined simply to the tradition of rational enquiry that it engendered.

Given the rise of militant secularism or new atheism today, it is important to make clear that this humanism was not, as often nowadays, another word for atheism. It was not seen as being in conflict with Christianity, indeed it was seen as a recovery of the idea that we were made in God's image. Hence the symbol *par excellence* of humanism, the Vitruvian man (there is now also a Vitruvian woman), the figure with arms and legs outstretched placed within a circle within a square, showing how the proportions of



*Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti. This statue is in the Uffizi Gallery courtyard, Florence.*

the human form matched the divine proportions discovered in architecture and art.

Now, in presenting the Renaissance as a single unified movement, I am, of course, greatly oversimplifying. Nevertheless, despite criticism of the term Renaissance, it has survived as a meaningful one and I would contend it does reflect a real and identifiable moment in human history. If there is one figure who can be said to personify the essence of all the many aspects of Renaissance humanism, it is the fifteenth century Italian architect, painter, linguist, poet, cleric and philosopher, Leon Battista Alberti, a man justly described as the first 'Universal Man'. He is no bad guide to understanding what was new about this movement.

Alberti is not well-known today. His chief claim to modern fame is as the first to lay down in print the scientific principles of perspective in painting. But apart from art, he wrote on many other subjects: sculpture, architecture, household management, veterinary science, and so on. He also wrote plays and verse. It is the philosophy which permeates all his work that is the key to understanding the whole man, and it is a coherent, rational, optimistic, I would argue, deeply spiritual world view, even though it is not in the current vogue for a contemplative and one might say, passive spirituality. Alberti's aim is the good and happy life, *vivere bene e lodati*. It is an individual goal but also a requirement of a healthy society and true religion; as he put it, you should aim to 'Be agreeable to yourself, welcome to others, and useful to many'.

Alberti's greatest work is his Ten Books on Architecture in which he introduced the work of the Roman engineer Vitruvius to the contemporary world. He was an architect himself, in the classical tradition, and was an important influence on the greater sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio. It is to this tradition that we owe the Georgian style. For Alberti, as for Palladio, architecture is not just a matter of building elegantly. Good architecture, and particularly that of sacred buildings, should do more.

Beauty was not in the eye of the beholder, it was a real quality that was derived from the application of certain mathematical principles. These were divinely ordered and part of the natural order, so the beautiful was an expression of the divine. So, for instance, it was argued that the focus of churches should be round, as such a shape demonstrated the unity, the infinity, the uniformity and the justice of God. Entering a church should, therefore, be a practical experience of the nature of God. And inside, as Palladio wrote, 'white is the colour for churches, for as the colour of purity it is most akin to God. Nothing in a temple should distract the mind from the contemplation of the Divine, and the decoration should inflame us to the service of God and good works'. The desired result, however, was not that of mediaeval piety, hence the emphasis on service and works rather than devotion.

Architectural analogies were widely used to express spiritual truths. So it was said that just as a column can support a great weight placed on it as long as it is upright, so the upright soul can bear great misfortune placed upon it. Spiritual tranquillity is the goal, and it, like a great building, is a human edifice, not a God-given attribute. It has to be built through human intention, knowledge and skill. We must not rely on God, for as Alberti declares, we were given abilities to use and we affront God by not using them. He even takes a decidedly rational attitude to prayer. 'In adversity, you may invoke the aid of God,

but you should not abandon yourself in this and lead yourself to believe that you cannot by your own powers do that which you surely can do’.

The idea is important in Renaissance humanism that people, having been given these abilities, are required to use them. Alberti observes that: ‘Nature, that is God, formed man in part heavenly and divine, in part more beautiful and nobler than any mortal thing...Be certain, then, that man was not born to waste away in idleness but to work at great and magnificent tasks by which he can, first of all, please and honour God, and also bring about the habit of virtue and thereby the fruit of happiness’. So he urges: ‘Let us determine to refuse no labour by which to become something more than we are’.

The worldview of the Renaissance was guided by the rediscovery of classical writings. Yet, the philosophy of Renaissance humanism was not that of the schools of classical Greece, however much it owed to them. Classical philosophers certainly argued a person had a duty to themselves and, most argued, a civic duty to participate in the society of which they were a part. But the idea of specific responsibilities to care for the sick, weak and poor owes everything to Jesus of Nazareth. Alberti, writing about the character of the priest, says:

*It is to be expected of a man of good character...that he should meditate upon, devote his energy toward, and carry out the duty that, in his judgement, one man owes to all mankind, of offering his services and generosity to assist the ill, the weak, and the destitute, and to ease their suffering. Herein lies the responsibility of the priest and those under him.*

It is notable that Alberti’s humanism succeeded effortlessly in incorporating Christian care into its philosophy. At the same time, it is also notable that Alberti’s priest is not the representative of Christ on Earth whose key role is to perform the sacraments, the conventional view of the Church, but a sort of philosopher sage, who uses wisdom to guide his flock into right actions.

Alberti says that ‘Man was born to be useful to himself and others; and our primary and proper use is to turn the powers of the soul toward virtue, to recognise the causes and order of things, and thereby to venerate God’. His humanism is indeed individualistic but it has a deeply engrained awareness that a notion of civic duty and sense of responsibility to those less fortunate are part of what is required of a full human being.

This is a brief overview of a tradition that is very much richer. I hope to have indicated that, as the humanism of the Renaissance was the foundation of the Enlightenment, and Unitarianism is nothing if it is not a child of the Enlightenment, this enlightened vision is a key part of our heritage. No other religious movement has such a claim to it. Its emerging humanism represents an opportunity in the development of western Christendom that I regret was lost: first obscured by the rise of neo-platonist mysticism, then overtaken by the appearance of Protestantism, and finally crushed in the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church to the Reformation.

For me, the humanism found in the writings of Alberti and contemporaries is the most

holistic of worldviews, reconciling the macrocosm with the microcosm, God with humanity, the natural with the created world, and the material with the spiritual. Human achievement, in science, art, music, exploration, architecture, industry, even sport, is to be celebrated, and in this optimistic and positive worldview human beings are active participants in the process of salvation.

When we talk of the Renaissance Man or Woman, we are talking about the sort of complete person that we should all strive to be. We should always be seeking new challenges in an active approach to life, in the words of Alberti's motto, *Quid tum?*, sometimes translated as, 'What next?' We should always be seeking to enhance our intellectual capacities, spiritual awareness, physical abilities and social skills, to be agreeable to ourselves, welcome to others, useful to many, and in so doing, to serve God.

**Dr Tim Powell is Treasurer of Bath Unitarian Fellowship, which meets at Marshfield. He is a member of the UCA.**



## The 'Goddess' in our religious life

Images of the Divine Feminine are to be found deep within both Jewish and Christian traditions, writes *Yvonne Aburrow*

The Goddess has been recognised by some Unitarians for more than 20 years. The Unitarian Universalist course, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, was launched in 1986.<sup>1</sup>

I think it is important, in honouring female images of the Divine, not to start gender stereotyping, and assuming that some qualities are inherently masculine, and others inherently feminine. The ultimate Divine is probably beyond gender; but rather than always using masculine and gender-neutral language, it would be great to use feminine language sometimes too, however you regard the Divine.

As the Rev Maud Robinson of Edinburgh Unitarians has written:

*God does not have a gender and although we can readily accept that intellectually, we should be aware that many of us have a deep history of the use of male-centred language in prayer and that it is embedded in our collective psyche. The word God, in itself, causes me problems, it is a word, which despite our modern sophistication and political correctness can't but conjure up images of a male godhead for many of us. How can we escape from these deeply ingrained images of a male godhead?*

If you are a Christian Unitarian, the answer could be to look into the Christian tradition for feminine images of the Divine. Some of these figures are aspects of the Divine, and some of them are glorified humans. Let's explore each of them in turn.

## **Asherah**

Asherah was the ancient Hebrew Goddess whose worship the Hebrew priests were always trying to stamp out. Asherah poles were erected to her. She is the Queen of Heaven whose worship the prophet Jeremiah so vehemently opposed (*Jeremiah 7:17-18 and 44:17*). She was worshipped in ancient Israel as the consort of El, and in Judah as the consort of Yahweh and Queen of Heaven (the Hebrews baked small cakes for her festival, which inspired American Unitarian Universalists to produce a course, Cakes for the Queen of Heaven).

## **God the Mother**

Dame Julian of Norwich, the great Christian mystic, referred to God the Mother (in the context of Trinitarian theology):

*And thus in our creation God Almighty is our natural father, and God all-wisdom is our natural mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit. These are all one God, one Lord. In the knitting and joining he is our real, true spouse and we are his loved wife and his fair maiden. ...The Second Person of the Trinity is our mother in nature, in our substantial making. In him we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother by mercy in our sensuality, by taking flesh. Thus our mother, Christ, in whom our parts are kept unseparated, works in us in various ways. For in our mother, Christ, we profit and increase, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and by virtue of his passion, death, and resurrection joins us to our substance.*

[<http://www.gloriana.nu/mother.htm>]

And modern feminist Christians have revived liturgical references to God the Mother.

## **Hagia Hesychia**

Holy Silence is particularly celebrated by the Hesychasts, a group of Eastern Christian mystics who pray silently, communing with the Divine. She is another aspect of Christ. Hesychasm is defined as "the process of retiring inward by ceasing to register the senses, in order to achieve an experiential knowledge of God". (*Wikipedia*).

## **Hagia Sophia**

The Divine Wisdom, Sophia, is frequently referred to in the *Apocrypha*. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, they distinguish between God's Essence (transcendent and unknowable, called *ousia*) and his Energies (immanent and recognisable), which include wisdom and are often experienced as light. Wisdom is called Sophia in Eastern Christianity and Sapientia in Western Christianity. Some nineteenth-century Russian mystics wanted to include her in the Trinity, as the energy between the three Persons or hypostases.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Wisdom is understood to be the Divine Logos who was incarnated as Christ, or is seen as an aspect of Christ. Sophia is also seen as being represented by the Theotokos (Virgin Mary). Sophia is expressed as the Holy Wisdom of God and the saints, obtained through humility, and Mary is the first and greatest of all saints. In Eastern Orthodoxy, humility is the highest wisdom and is to be cultivated more

than any other virtue. It is humility that brings Holy Wisdom and salvation.

In the nineteenth century, some Russian Orthodox mystics (Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Sergei Bulgakov) suggested that Sophia be included in the Trinity (presumably thereby making a quaternity). Solovyov had several visions of Sophia. And Hildegard of Bingen, the great medieval mystic, also celebrated Sophia.

In the English Protestant tradition, Jane Leade, a 17th-century Christian mystic, Universalist, and founder of the Philadelphian Society, wrote extensive descriptions of her visions and dialogues with the 'Virgin Sophia' who, she said, revealed to her the spiritual workings of the Universe. Leade was greatly influenced by the theosophical writings of 16th Century German Christian mystic Jakob Böhme, who also wrote about Sophia in works such as *The Way to Christ*. Jakob Böhme was an important influence on a number of Christian mystics and religious leaders.

Sophia was a very important figure in Gnosticism, where she is regarded as being exiled from the Godhead (rather like the Shekhinah in Judaism). Two of the Nag Hammadi texts were addressed to her: the *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, which embraces her paradoxical nature; and *Pistis Sophia*. Interestingly, Jesus referred to two of his disciples as the Boanerges (Sons of Thunder). Here's an excerpt from the *Thunder, Perfect Mind*:

I am the honoured one and the scorned one.  
I am the whore and the holy one.  
I am the wife and the virgin.  
I am [the mother] and the daughter.  
I am the members of my mother.  
I am the barren one and many are her sons.  
I am she whose wedding is great, and I have not taken a husband.  
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.  
I am the solace of my labour pains.  
I am the bride and the bridegroom, and it is my husband who begot me.  
I am the mother of my father and the sister of my husband and he is my offspring.

## **Ruach**

In Genesis, the Breath of God moves on the face of the waters, creating the world. The word *ruach* appears numerous times in the Tanakh ('Old Testament') and can also indicate the life-force of human beings. The Breath of God, also traditionally feminine, is called the *Ruach* in Hebrew, and was probably the prototype for the idea of the Holy Spirit (who is often depicted as a dove, which is another feminine symbol and an attribute of the goddess Venus).

## **Shekhinah**

The Divine Presence is known in Judaism as the *Shekhinah*, and in Islam as the *Sakina*, the peace of God, which descends upon believers (mentioned twice in the Koran). She is said to descend upon the Jewish household on the Sabbath eve at the lighting of the candles (usually done by the lady of the house). Liberal feminist and earth-centred Jews

have recently been reviving the memory of her, exploring the *Zohar* (a Jewish mystical text) and reflecting on her relationship with other goddess images. The Shekhinah is exiled in the physical world and trying to rejoin the Godhead. We can help reunite them in the process of *Tikkun* - the exercise of compassion, which helps to heal the rift between the worlds. Also, it is regarded as a holy thing to make love on the Sabbath eve, as this helps to reunite the *Shekhinah* and the Godhead.

### The Bride

*The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Revelation 22:17)*

It's difficult to work out what the Bride originally meant in the *Book of Revelation*, but it could, if viewed in the context of Jungian psychology, represent the anima. Traditionally it has been interpreted to mean the Church as the Bride of Christ; just as Israel is the Bride of Yahweh, and every Jewish person is seen as part of the body of the *Shekhinah*.

### The Myrrh-bearers

Eastern Orthodox Christianity celebrates the third Sunday of Pascha (the second after Easter) as the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers, the women and men who anointed Christ's body after his death, and who were the first witnesses of his resurrection. This made them the 'Apostles to the Apostles' and they are sometimes referred to as 'Equal to the Apostles'. The Myrrhbearers are traditionally listed as Mary Magdalene; Mary, the wife of Cleopas; Joanna, the wife of Chuza the steward of Herod Antipas; Salome, the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also known as the Boanerges; Susanna; Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus; Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

In the South of France, there is a legend that Mary Magdalene, Mary Salome, and Mary Jacobe fled to sea in a boat and landed at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. This is also a place of pilgrimage for the Roma (Gypsies); in Roma legend, they were accompanied by Sara the Kali (a dark-skinned woman, either a Roma or the daughter of Mary Magdalene). There is an excellent novel, *The Wild Girl*, by Michèle Roberts, which is about Mary



*Statue of Athena, Goddess of wisdom, warfare and crafts. Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)*

Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus, written from a Gnostic point of view.

In Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, there are many female saints, though many of them represent the ideal type of Christian womanhood – virginal and chaste, meek, self-sacrificing. The Irish legends of Saint Brigid, however, appear to be drawing on pre-Christian sources; and the Myrrh-bearers also include a wider range of feminine archetypes, including the crone, the midwife and the layer-out.

### **Theotokos**

The Virgin Mary (known in Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the Theotokos, the God-bearer) is a fascinating figure. She seems both submissive and fiery in the Magnificat (*Luke 1:46-55*), the canticle where she responds to the news that she is to bear a child, Jesus. In the Catholic tradition, she seems a little too saccharine and submissive. In Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, she is a mother of sorrows, combining the foreshadowed pain of loss with the joy of knowing who her child is. In Coptic art, she is simply full of joy. She is a paradoxical figure, being both mother and virgin.

Many of Mary's attributes and names were borrowed from Pagan goddesses. The titles Stella Maris (Star of the Sea) originally belonged to Isis; the title Queen of Heaven originally belonged to Asherah and Hera. Mary acquired the symbol of the peacock from Hera, with the eyes in its tail representing the stars of heaven. Many statues of Isis and Horus were re-used as the Madonna and Child, and it may be that some of the Black Madonnas in the south of France were originally statues of Isis. Evidently people need a divine mother figure, and even if Mary is not traditionally regarded as a goddess in Christian mythology, she has been elevated to near-divine status in the hearts of many Christians. The Black Madonna represents the dark and sorrowful side of motherhood, the loss when the child is relinquished from the maternal care.

### **Is the Divine gendered?**

There are three possible models of sex and gender.

1. The idea that both sex and gender are biological givens – you are born either male or female, and your gender is the same as your biological sex;
2. The idea that sex is a biological given, but gender is socially constructed – so it is natural to divide humans into male and female, but how your gender role is played out depends on upbringing, culture and social environment.
3. Both sex and gender are socially constructed – the importance accorded to the category of sex (and some of its physical aspects) are socially constructed, and gender is a performance.

Clearly your model of sex and gender determines how you see the Divine, since we and the Divine reflect each other. Some theologians see God as hyper-masculine, rendering even men subordinate by his penetrative power. Others see the Godhead as transcending gender, and many have come up with other names which express this non-gendered deity.

When I hear the word "God", I hear it as a masculine noun. When I hear Spirit of Life, or the Divine, I hear it as gender-neutral. But it doesn't explicitly include the Goddess. In

Unitarianism, women are regarded as completely equal to men, and we have embraced the Goddess to a certain extent, and use inclusive gender-neutral language wherever possible.

So, how does the Goddess differ from 'traditional' views of God?

- In all traditions, she is regarded as immanent in the world, not transcendent.
- She is not just an aspect of a male God, but a being in her own right. (If you want to be properly Unitarian about this, perhaps you could regard Her as an emanation of the Divine source.)
- She is associated with Nature and the wilderness.
- She is often seen as a mother who gives birth to the Universe and who also IS the Universe.
- But she is also the wise crone and the wild maiden.
- She is the embodiment of compassion and wisdom.
- She is not interested in imposing laws from on high, but on the emergence of harmony at the grass-roots level.
- She is much more than a Virgin Mother -- this is an image which has been damaging to women by holding out an unattainable ideal and denying the validity of sexual pleasure.
- Her worship includes sacred sexuality.

In the ancient Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, the Divine is divided into 10 manifest aspects, and one transcendent aspect, called the *Ain Sof Aur* (the sea of limitless light). Yahweh (*God the Father*) is seen as one of the manifest aspects. A Unitarian hymn (*from Hymns for Living*) makes a similar distinction: "Before God was, I AM." The unmanifest aspect of God is called the *Pleroma* in the Gnostic tradition, and it subsumes all opposite qualities in itself; opposite qualities, such as dark and light, male and female, are products of manifestation, which causes them to be differentiated from each other.

If the Divine transcends gender, shouldn't we just use gender-neutral language? Perhaps, but for centuries we have been using exclusively masculine language, which makes women feel inferior. So we need to use some female imagery to balance things up, and help women to feel that we are made in the Divine image. After all, the original Hebrew of the *Book of Genesis* reads, "Male and female created They them, in Their image." I like the way some Unitarian ministers have started to refer to God as She. We need to be careful about how we use inclusive wording, so as not to exclude the other gender and the diversity of sexual orientations. It's good to use varied imagery for the Divine, as in David Dawson's lovely new hymn, *Name Unnamed*, which emphasises the essence and energies, the knowable and unknowable aspects of the Divine.

**Yvonne Aburrow is a member of Frenchay Chapel, Bristol.**

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<sup>1</sup>In 1977 the UUA General Assembly unanimously passed the Women & Religion Resolution, calling all individual Unitarian Universalists and organisations to examine and put aside sexist assumptions, attitudes, and language and to explore and eliminate religious roots of sexism in myths, traditions and beliefs.

The Unitarian Universalist Women in Religion course, Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, was launched at the 1986 UUA General Assembly.

[http://www.uuwr.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=56](http://www.uuwr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=56)

# The Christian tradition re-awakened

On the eve of returning to America, *Jim Robinson* reflects on efforts to revive liberal Christianity among Unitarians in London

Who was Jesus? What was his message? What happened after his death? How does it inform our life today? Did he say everything that he is quoted as saying in the New Testament? How can we celebrate communion? What did Jesus teach about prayer? What did he teach about forgiveness?

These questions, along with many others, have been the focus of the Liberal Christian Affinity Group in the London and South-East England District. The group has been meeting for three years at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel, first as a chapel group and then as a District group. Recently some members started a second similar group ‘South of the Thames’ (meeting at the Croydon Unitarian Church). A third group has been explored at Golders Green Unitarians, focusing on Christianity and the arts. The participants in these groups come from a half dozen Unitarian churches in the wider London area. Average attendance ranges from a handful to as many as 20.

The idea for these groups originated in my ministry at Rosslyn Hill Chapel. The Chapel is a beautiful Victorian Gothic building with stained glass windows depicting stories from the Bible, especially about the ministry of Jesus. Yet the members of the Chapel (in general) did not know or connect with these stories. This seemed unfortunate to me. The history of Unitarianism (and of Rosslyn Hill Chapel) is rooted in the liberal Christian tradition. The message of Jesus is of value today for everyone in the congregation (whatever their theology or spiritual orientation). It seemed time for the chapel community to reclaim the great teacher Jesus.

I also realised that the issue of Christianity within the General Assembly in Britain was much bigger than one chapel. After writing an article on engagement groups for *The Inquirer*, a leader within the Unitarian Christian Association publicly (on a church public web site) called my ministry dangerous for the British General Assembly. I was shocked. So I entered into a dialogue with this colleague and found how deep the distrust was for some between Unitarian Christians and other Unitarians in Britain. I found that the London District was viewed with anger (by some) for the way it was seen as dismissing Christianity. Something new needed to happen: for my chapel, the London District, and for the wider General Assembly.

A great American Unitarian, the Rev Edward Everett Hale, wrote: ‘I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything. But still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.’ I am one small person with very little power – but I saw that I could do something about the situation. So I have spoken often in my chapel about the message of Jesus and about the meaning of the chapel windows. And I started the original Liberal Christian Affinity Group in the London District.

The response has been encouraging. Unitarians in the London District are open to learn



*The Rev Jim Robinson (right) leads a Jesus Retreat at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, in April 2008. The Retreat was supported by the London District and the UCA.*

**Photo: Jim Corrigan**

from the teachings of Jesus. Most are eclectic and pluralistic in their spirituality and do not self-identify as Christian. Yet many want to have a liberal Christian message as an important part of their eclectic Unitarian identity. And some definitely self-identify as Christian. The London District leaders have warmly and enthusiastically supported the liberal Christian affinity groups. And the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) has been supportive also and the potential for meaningful dialogue between the UCA and the London District is great.

I am writing this article now because I am returning to the United States this Spring. Our daughter is having a baby in March, and my wife and I could not bear to be grandparents with an ocean between us. So after six wonderful years in the British Unitarian movement, I will go back to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

I wanted this story to be told so that these groups in the London District might be encouraged to continue. And I wanted to give my thanks to the Unitarian Christian Association for all of the important work done in the spirit of loving kindness. I have felt love and support from the UCA and I deeply appreciate it.

**The Rev Jim Robinson has been Minister at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel at Hampstead in London, for the past six years. He returns to the United States this Spring.**

# Time and eternity in T.S. Eliot

In a recent sermon, *Jim Corrigan* looks at how religion helped the poet T.S. Eliot to explore the ‘heights and depths’ of experience

A confession: T.S. Eliot was an early love of mine – I became hooked on his poems at school and university, and it’s a love that has never deserted me.

But there are basics I just never seem to get – like why is Eliot’s famous series of poems, the *Four Quartets*, called this? OK, there are four poems – so four is right, but why quartets when each is divided into **five** sections? None of the books I read seemed to answer this question -- which had me scratching my head. And then finally I got it: the poem is named after a musical quartet, a composition for four stringed instruments. It was inspired in particular by Beethoven’s *String Quartet in A minor (Opus 132)* – which is also divided into five movements (more on Beethoven later). The penny dropped!

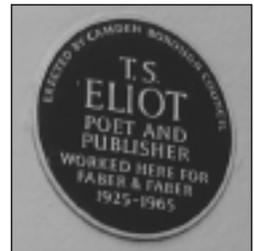
My subject is ‘Religion and Poetry in T.S. Eliot’, but this is a big area, so I need to narrow it down! – I’ll concentrate on the Four Quartets, regarded by many as his greatest achievement, including by Eliot himself. But even this is a big subject, so all I can hope to do is highlight a few themes, and draw a few lessons.

Eliot’s family came from the heart of Unitarianism in Boston (in Massachusetts) – Eliot liked to joke that his family’s relationship to Unitarianism in Boston was like that of the Borgias to the Papacy. However, Eliot himself was born in St Louis in Missouri in 1888, where his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, had moved, in the early 1800s, as a Unitarian missionary to what was then ‘the frontier’. Eliot’s father became a successful businessman in St Louis, and his son Thomas Stearns Eliot grew up here – but with regular summer trips back to family in New England, that north-eastern corner of the United States.

It’s worth saying immediately that T.S. Eliot rejected Unitarianism early, aged 18 or 19 – at the time he began a lifelong religious quest which was to see him join the Church of England, as an Anglo-Catholic, 20 years later, in 1927. So why did he reject Unitarianism? He described it as a ‘tepid religion’, one concerned with outward form – with right behaviour – rather than the inner soul, with all its trials and torments. Of course his criticism was of the Unitarianism he saw around him – he did admire Unitarian rebels such as Emerson and his ‘transcendentalism’.

But it is clear that Eliot would never have been happy within any kind of Unitarianism, his personality was of a radically different cast. He had regard for a few American writers, but felt none came close to the great fourteenth century Italian poet, Dante, whose explorations of the heights and depths of experience – of heaven and hell – profoundly influenced Eliot.

Eliot sensed in the early 1900s, as a student at Harvard, that the



Plaque for T.S. Eliot at SOAS's Faber Building, 24 Russell Square, London.

coming century was to be deeply secular and materialist (at least in the West). His art can be seen as an assault on this mentality – as he tries to make us aware of realities beyond those which can be seen and measured. He chose to pursue his art on the Continent and then in England (where he settled), away from his family, resisting the lure of a Harvard professorship (in philosophy).

Well, what about the *Four Quartets*? – those four poems written in the later 1930s and early 1940. The four are entitled: *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages* and *Little Gidding*. The first, *Burnt Norton*, opens with Eliot in dry, philosophic mode – it's hard to get into, with riddles that can 'do your head in'.

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.

Now what on earth does that mean? But however obscure, these opening lines introduce the main themes of *Four Quartets*: the relationship between past, present and future; how we are imprisoned in a 'time-bound' reality – with redemption perhaps possible! ; while our past – and even 'what might have been' -- remains with us, in our memories. The pace and mood begins to change:

What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden.

Hints of experiences -- real, but also unrealised: 'Other echoes inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?' Eliot invites us into this world of memory and imagination, this world of might-have been – the language tantalising, vivid yet dreamlike:

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
Into our first world, shall we follow  
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.

But what of the experience he hints at? -- and where is *Burnt Norton* anyway?

Each of the *Four Quartets* is about a real place, where Eliot had a profound mystical experience. *Burnt Norton* is a manor house in Gloucestershire which the poet visited in the mid-1930s with one of his closest friends, a visiting American and Bostonian, Emily Hale. She was in love with Tom (as family and friends called Eliot). And for much of his life, Eliot seems to have been in love with Emily Hale; she was in many ways his poetic muse.

In the gardens of Burnt Norton he had an experience of the transcendent which he tries to put into words, perhaps nowhere more powerfully than in the second movement of Burnt Norton:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.  
The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
The resolution of its partial horror.  
Yet the enchainment of past and future  
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,  
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation  
Which flesh cannot endure.

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered.

Eliot writes here of transcending time-bound reality, of reaching a moment outside time (of profound insight or beauty) -- achieved not through flight, but through going so deeply into time that we reach its very centre, its essence, the mathematical still point around which the whole world revolves, but which itself does not turn (and therefore is not part of time, certainly not diurnal time). In this timeless moment, he cannot say how long -- or where -- he felt release, 'surrounded by a grace of sense, a white light still and moving' -- 'both a new world and the old' were made explicit.

Eliot has already warned: 'human kind cannot bear very much reality'. And this glimpse of the eternal can only be remembered (and imperfectly understood) when back in normal time. Time protects us from the ultimate realities, 'heaven and damnation' -- 'which flesh cannot endure'.

Eliot believed in heaven and hell, maybe not as places perhaps, but absolutely real nonetheless. He believed too in sin and evil and our need for redemption. By the mid-1930s, Eliot was estranged from his mentally-ill wife Vivienne, and was wracked by guilt. He had an intense experience with Emily Hale in those gardens, but his love for her faded. (His family always expected him to marry Emily, but he never did – even after his wife was committed to a mental institution in 1938 and after his wife’s death in 1947).

The poet goes on to describe a twilight world of disaffection, not one of escape but trapped in time, the inhabitants ‘distracted from distraction by distraction’; ‘empty of meaning’. Real understanding must be gained another way: ‘Descend lower’, the poet writes – into the depths, including of perpetual solitude -- this way of deprivation is ‘one way’ to enlightenment, while the other ‘is the same, not in movement, but abstention from movement.’

In the fifth section (of *Burnt Norton*), Eliot describes his battle to convey meaning through words, but ‘the words strain ... break under the burden’. Eliot wants to go beyond where words can take him, and he senses the same struggle in Beethoven, in that *String Quartet in A minor (Opus 132)*, which was composed in 1825 when Beethoven was deaf. The composer aimed to go ‘beyond music’ – and he had, said Eliot, created ‘a kind of heavenly gaiety’.

The second quartet is called *East Coker*, named after a villagehamlet in Somerset where Eliot’s ancestors migrated from in the 17th Century, as part of the Pilgrim exodus from religious persecution. As he approaches the village, the poet sees a vision of the past: in an open field people are dancing around a fire, ‘Keeping time, keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in the living seasons’. But the time-bound circularity of that rural past becomes more and more oppressive, until: ‘Feet rising and falling, eating and drinking. Dung and death’. Then, a new start:

Dawn points, and another day  
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind  
Wrinkles and slides. I am here  
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

The freedom out on that vast ocean suggests the voyage to ‘the new world’ that Eliot’s ancestors made, but perhaps more strongly the freedom of our present age, where all seems possible.

At the end (of *East Coker*), Eliot describes how wisdom can develop with age ... the ideal now found not in ‘the intense moment with no before and after’ (that he wrote of earlier), but rather through ‘a lifetime burning in every moment’ – being fully alive in the present, yet fully attuned to both past and future – it was an awareness that Eliot sought all his life, his vision of the perfect life.

The third quartet, *The Dry Salvages*, is dominated by the theme of water. Eliot returns to the America of his childhood, where the great Mississippi river flows through St Louis. ‘I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown god’. The

river can appear tamed, but 'ever, however, implacable, keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder of what men choose to forget'. Then to his other childhood, on the New England coast, at Cape Ann, where the sea tosses up hints 'of earlier and other creation'. The sea has many voices, 'many Gods and many voices'. For fishermen and sailors, the tolling bell of the ship 'measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried groundswell'. And the dangers ever-present: the sharp rocks off Cape Ann known as the Dry Salvages.

The last Quartet, *Little Gidding*, brings us back to England. Little Gidding takes its name from the remote spot north of Huntingdon, where a religious community was founded in the seventeenth century by Nicholas Ferrar – living by poverty, discipline and prayer. During the Civil War in the 1640s, the community gave refuge to Charles I – the little chapel was later ransacked by Cromwell's men, with the organ and pulpit ripped out and burned. In the mid-1930s, Eliot visited Little Gidding, where a religious community had been re-established. He began writing this poem later when he was serving as a fire warden in London during the Blitz, and he draws the parallels: war, fire, destruction – bravery, fortitude, faith.

He describes his approach to Little Gidding, and then once in the chapel: 'you are not here to verify, instruct yourself or inform curiosity... You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid'. Through religious observance and discipline, in both past and present, meaning is realised, history and the moment intersect.

The major themes are brought together in the magnificent finale of *Little Gidding*, in the fifth movement. Eliot turns back farther than the English Civil War, to the 14th Century English mystic Dame Julian of Norwich. In the dark and momentous days of the Second World War, 'History is now and England', but also (in Julian's words): 'And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well ...' Here meaning and purpose are found, not simply by the individual but **by the community** (of which Eliot was a vital part). And the end of all our exploring? -- 'to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time'. Why? ... because we have been transformed by our journey.

Eliot, while striving for the perfect life, was tormented by his failings – and it was only in his last eight years that he was to enjoy happiness in love (before his death in 1965). This was in his second marriage to Valerie, 38 years his junior.

T.S. Eliot conveys heights and depths of religious experience that few of us are likely to know. Even if he never achieved his ideal, it was the journey that counted – Eliot the Puritan, the Pioneer, the Missionary venturing to the frontier, the frontiers of knowledge and experience.

I think we can see elements of Unitarianism remaining in Eliot -- his high-mindedness, moral rectitude (just like us!), perhaps most of all in his breadth: , drawing on Buddhism, Hinduism and Christian mysticism (as he does in this poem). But his religious sensibilities ran to extremes: he was attracted to sainthood and martyrdom; he practised self-denial, and was wracked by his sinfulness. Our Unitarian faith is not one of extremes, but we should not ignore the heights and depths of religious experience. We too need to

be able to touch people in their deepest moments. At our best, we do this – and if we continue to be bold, we will go on doing so.

Then we can say, with Julian of Norwich: ‘And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’ Amen.

**Jim Corrigan is Hon. President of Golders Green Unitarians and a Lay Pastorate student at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.**



## A space to encounter the divine

*Lucy Harris explains why, as a Unitarian living near Salisbury, she mainly worships at Church of England services*

Let's start with the straightforward explanation of why I tend to go to Church of England services rather than Unitarian ones. On ‘sustainable commitment’ grounds, I consider it is only worthwhile worshipping in communities where the journey time to/from the meeting place is less than the duration of the worship event. So for a service lasting one hour, I would not want to travel more than 45 minutes. This puts the Unitarian services at Trowbridge, Southampton and Bournemouth out of my reach.

Hang on, says the geographer, if that's your triangle, you must be somewhere close to Salisbury, and there's a vigorous if unofficial Unitarian fellowship in Salisbury. Er, yes. That's where the question stops being quite so straightforward. I enjoy the company of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Salisbury. They are intellectually testing, diverse, caring, supportive and generous, as you would wish a vigorous Unitarian Fellowship to be. Their meetings are varied, including addresses, little rituals like candle lighting, readings, music, periods of silent contemplation. And the meetings are always thought-provoking. So why is this not my natural home?

Firstly, there is to be considered the number of Sundays that I can allow to be taken up with worship activities each month. Or as my husband would express it, how many Sundays each month are broken into by my hobby, which he does not share. 6 p.m. is a very awkward time. We have other hobbies that we share and with both of us working 12-hour days during the week, our time together at the weekend is very precious.

For some years now the balance seems to be struck, with about one Sunday a month being ‘interrupted’. I used to be a member of the Salisbury Fellowship. But somehow the use of my one Sunday session a month with them still left me hungry – something, it was gradually made clear to me, was missing in that meeting, so it was a waste of my one session a month for me to go there.

It took me some years to work out what the issue was and I'm still amending my analysis. But fundamentally it has to do with what worship is about. For me, worship must have both solitary and communal aspects, and the solitary aspects I know how to make space for. The communal bit – about devoting time and focus and energy to making a personal approach to God – requires for me a group of people that make the space in which to do this. Feeling part of a group that is regularly turning towards God and surrendering concerns and failures, and by doing so making enough quietness for nourishment to enter or emerge, makes the space for me – and makes it feel safe. Every now and then it is necessary to experience the group-ness firsthand, by physically standing and moving together inside the group, carrying out the same act towards the same end (though in individual ways). 'Though we are many, we are one body, for we all partake of the same bread.'

I have on only one occasion had this feeling in a Unitarian service recently, and that was one which included a simple version of the labyrinth dance. Aside from one other numinous experience, my 11 years of Unitarian worship has been based on intellect through some exposition of the word (very much showing the Protestant roots) or else a humble – or not so humble – set of personal observations on how we could better serve or live within the world (very humanistic).

Whereas, of course, with the Church of England communion service, the whole thing is set up to facilitate an approach to God and to express the relationship with All That Is. As you would expect, I have tremendous theological difficulties with their words – and much can be destroyed by a 'Jesus-Man/God' sermon. But when they stay away from that, I have enough headroom in the general run of the wording to carry out my own simultaneous translation that suits my own theology of *panentheism*; I have enough time to hear their metaphor for God and internally map it to one of my metaphors.

Added to which, we all know our movements around 'the stage'. There is a stately flow of people making room for each other, and respecting the down-turned eyes as people move back to their seats from the altar rail. It is, in some senses, a dance. And at least for the duration of the ritual, there is suspension of scepticism, disputation, otherness. All are together at the table; all are together at the foot of the Redeemer; there is room for all (leave the arguments about church finances, women bishops, and ordination of people who are in same-sex relationships till later). I find there really is a lot to be said for it.

Moreover, there are churches everywhere I go. One is 400 metres up the road, and there are four more in a radius of 3 miles (5-10 mins). And in Salisbury (9 miles), there is that great epiphany in stone, that great shout for joy that is the Cathedral. I go to Taizé services there, and sacred dance, as well as glorious Evensong.

Where is all this for me within the Unitarian movement?

If only the Church of England would give up their identification of Jesus with the second person of God, I'd be there week in, week out (because they have 8 a.m. services every Sunday that don't impact at all on a sleepy husband who doesn't wake till 9 a.m.!).

How can we in Unitarian Christian Association meet the needs of devotional people like myself who cannot accept Jesus as God and yet feed in grateful nourishment on the relational aspect between humankind and God?

**Lucy Harris is a UCA member who lives near Salisbury. (A version of this article first appeared in the newsletter of the Unitarian Association for Lay Ministry).**



## TWO VIEWS ON 'FREE CHRISTIANITY'

### An inclusive tradition 'to be cherished'

We must continue to embrace those who accept the Trinity and those who reject it, argues *Roger Booth*

I was dismayed, but not surprised, to read in Jim Corrigan's editorial of the Summer 2009 issue of *The Herald* that 'we seem to have forgotten this (Free Christian) tradition almost completely'. I think this eclipse of Free Christianity is a cause for regret because the Christian wing of the movement seems to cover two differing modes of thought, namely Unitarian Christianity and Free Christianity. Fundamentally, the former stresses the singularity of the Godhead, while the latter accommodates all Christian concepts of the Godhead, be they Unitarian, Trinitarian or otherwise. There is thus a distinction of emphasis between these two strands of Christianity.

Considered dogmatically, the Unitarian Christian view of the Godhead can appear as sectarian as the Trinitarian. Whereas a flavour of Free Christianity may be found in the banner headline of the now defunct quarterly *The Christian Compass* which points to "...an inclusive Christian faith that is founded simply on the teaching, healing and cross of Jesus. This faith treats as secondary the doctrines that divide Christians, and frees them to concentrate on their Master's mission to 'preach the Kingdom of God and to heal.'" One Chapel noticeboard reads: 'In this Free Christian Chapel we try to follow the teaching of Jesus and encourage free thought.'

However, there are today only a handful of chapels in our movement which publicly proclaim their Free Christian position. Consequently, the chances of preserving Free Christianity through chapels dedicated to its promulgation are probably slim. I would guess, however, that there is a significant minority of worshippers at Unitarian Christian chapels who find the nature of the Godhead a mystery and would be reluctant to state whether Jesus was divine, or what was the theological effect of his death.

The Free Christian heritage may be preserved if the Christian side of the Unitarian movement will continue to provide a spiritual home not only for those who deny the

Trinity but also for those who are uncertain and ‘seeking’, and even for those who accept the Trinity. It may be preserved if the preaching, liturgy and hymns cater in some proportionate part for the needs of these three kinds of worshippers.

To depreciate the Free Church tradition would be to jettison a religious approach which, as Jim’s editorial pointed out, has a long and distinguished history in England from the time of the English Presbyterians and their leader in 1660, Richard Baxter. The heritage they passed down was the freedom of the individual to search for and reach his/her own decision on religious beliefs. In his effort to avoid tests which would act as barriers to would-be Christians, Baxter led a movement for the Reduction of Essentials and would only require acceptance of the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed and the Ten Commandments for entry to the Church of Christ. This, of course was radical thinking for the seventeenth century.

Baxter’s Reduction of Essentials was the matrix from which developed the later English Presbyterian promotion of free enquiry in religion. This facilitated the holding of many different views within the same congregation. The title ‘Free Christian’ superseded ‘English Presbyterian’, and was given national prominence in the formation of ‘The Free Christian Union’ by James Martineau and others in 1866.

Asked to act as its leader, Martineau stated in his reply: ‘In regard to external relations, we stand at the very crisis of the world most favourable to the action of an undogmatic Church – a Church unconditionally devoted to the pure Christian pieties and charities ... The Church is the Society of those who seek harmony with God; and all who agree on the terms of that harmony, so as to seek it in the same way, belong to the same Church ... whom accordingly would I admit to fellowship? All who seek harmony with God and are content with the terms. Whom would I exclude? Absolutely none, leaving the door forever open and letting all exclusion be self-exclusion.’

The Free Christian Union was formed and its meetings were attended by Anglican, Independent and Baptist clergy in addition to Presbyterians. But the Union did not prosper. However, in 1881 the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (BUFA) invited all ‘Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-subscribing and Kindred Congregations’ to a conference ‘in the hope that ... it will assemble the ministers and members of our congregations on the broad platform of religion and morality’.

These conferences were held nearly every three years until 1926 and became a bastion of the anti-dogmatic Presbyterian/Free Christian tradition; it was popularly known as ‘the National Conference of Free Christian Churches’. In 1926, Mrs Sydney Martineau, a relative of James, proposed its amalgamation with the BUFA and this was completed in 1928 at the formation of our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

Do not the qualities of inclusiveness and free enquiry bequeathed to us by English Presbyterianism/Free Christianity deserve to be cherished, fostered and protected?

**Dr Roger Booth retired last year as Lay Pastor at the Unitarian and Free Christian Chapel in the Garden at Bridport in Dorset. He was joint editor of The Christian Compass from 1999 till its closure in 2008.**

# A name that no longer serves a need

*Stephen Lingwood* believes our debate over Free Christianity could generate more heat than light

In our national community we are in a period of dialogue about what words and labels we want to use for ourselves. In the spirit of an open dialogue, I wanted to offer my reasons for believing we don't need the phrase 'Free Christian' in our national name in the twenty-first century.

My first reason is a historical one. We seem sometimes to use labels in a way that has nothing to do with their history. We often talk about the 'Free Christian' and the 'Unitarian' wings of our denomination as if this means 'the Christian' and 'the not-so-Christian' end. This is simply not true. The reason we have the words Free Christian and Unitarian has nothing to do with a debate about the Christian-ness of our denomination.

The debate between the Free Christian label and the Unitarian Christian label was not about Christian identity. Both sides were Christian. Put simply, some people (such as James Martineau) thought that 'Unitarian' referred only to a strict doctrinal position (anti-Trinitarianism). They did not want to define themselves by a doctrine, but by a spirit of openness, so they thought 'Free Christian' was a much better label. The irony is the Free Christians won the argument, but the word 'Unitarian' remained dominant. Today we understand 'Unitarian' to refer to a spirit of openness more than an exclusive doctrine. The word 'Unitarian' has a broader, more inclusive meaning, just as the Free Christians wanted.

Secondly the phrase 'Unitarian and Free Christian' suggests two separate movements, which we never were. The Unitarians and Universalists in America were separate movements, joining together in 1961. But 'Unitarian' and 'Free Christian' were two different labels for the *same tradition*. The reason those two labels developed is no longer a live question for us. The two labels represent a debate long since settled.

Thirdly the word 'Free' does not really have the same immediate associations as it did in the nineteenth century. For most people 'Free' means you don't have to pay. 'Free' Christianity suggests no collection plate! If we were to have any word, 'liberal' or 'progressive' would have a lot more meaning to most people.

Fourthly the name of the national community does not preclude any congregation calling itself whatever it likes. Some congregations can still call themselves Free Christian, just as some of our congregations call themselves Presbyterian and some of them even 'those who do not wish to be designated'! But if we had all of those in our title we would seem like a fractured and argumentative community, rather than one that believes in unity.

The ecumenical Free Christian spirit is one to be applauded – as Jim Corrigan pointed out in his last editorial. And I am involved in what must be the most active and progressive ecumenical grouping in the country. But James Martineau's idea that all Christians would come under the "Free Christian" umbrella was rather naïve. Ecumenical work must

respect differences of opinion, and not expect everyone to come around to our non-creedal position – as we should not be expected to conform to a creedal one.

Does this debate really matter? Well, no, not a great deal. As Jim points out, it would matter less if we had a clearer hold on our heritage. It would matter less if the spirit of Christian ecumenism and non-creedal openness was witnessed to more strongly. I'm not going to lose any sleep on the matter one way or another, though.

But my concern is that this debate will generate more heat than light. My concern is that that Unitarian Christians will be pulled into a petty argument, that has very little to do with the Gospel of Jesus. The point is we witness to Jesus not by the power of our argument, but by the power of our love. Let's not let our energy get sapped by this debate, but rather let's put our energy into deepening our Christian spirituality, and witnessing to the transformative power of God in our lives.

**Stephen Lingwood is Minister at Bank Street Unitarian Chapel in Bolton, Lancashire, and a member of the UCA.**



***The Unitarian Christian Association  
aims to provide a place where  
liberal Christianity can be explored  
within our General Assembly.***

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inside the back cover of this edition.

# Testament to the power of love

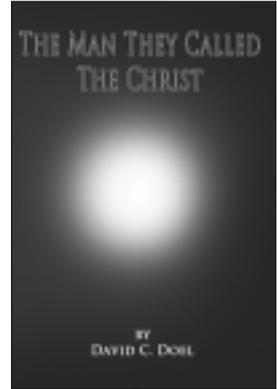
## **BOOK REVIEW: *The Man They Called The Christ* by David Doel**

(Unitarian Christian Association, 2009). £8.00.

(ISBN 978-0-557-23841-5)

*Vernon Marshall* pays tribute to a ‘liberating’ work that demonstrates the continuing relevance of Unitarian Christianity

I have read all David Doel’s books and found them all to be inspiring and deeply meaningful. His books usually are, it has to be said, quite complex and take a lot of concentration. This new book is a much easier read but has the same depth as his previous works. It is a book of 10 chapters, each with an intriguing title: *The Saviour, Parables as Shock Tactics, Blessings on the Poor, Doing Good and Having Faith, Feasting, the Abba Experience, Death, Resurrection, the Trinity, and, finally, Herod and the Christ Child.*



The writer gives us a brilliant collection of essays on a rational and reasonable Unitarian Christian position. Reading these, there can be no misunderstanding regarding what it is that separates a Unitarian Christian position from mainstream Christianity. David makes it very clear, however, that he is representing nobody’s religious stance except his own. Whatever one’s theological position within the Unitarian spectrum however, David Doel’s book gives us plenty of help in establishing why the Liberal Christian position has been so significant within our movement and why it is still relevant today.

David Doel begins by making clear his denunciation of the traditional concept of Jesus Christ as Saviour. He dismisses the claims of the gospel accounts that Jesus taught the end of the world and a new messianic reign. The message of Jesus, on the contrary, is the ‘restorative power of the Love of God’. David criticises the Church for its ‘paganising’ of Jesus. The Church, he says, has made us all passive recipients of the benefits of a bloody sacrifice in the ransom paid to the Devil. David instead talks about ‘a beautiful poetic genius... who lived out the wisdom he taught’.

In his books, David Doel manages very well to use the insights of psychology together with rational theological reflection. This book is no different. The salvation brought by Jesus is a liberation from attachment to our ‘self’, it is a means of focusing on the *here and now*, and leads to ‘perfect freedom’. What is important, says the author, is the discovery of Jesus’s saving truth, not by a ransom paid but by our own experience of following the spirit.

The understanding of the message of Jesus, as elaborated by David Doel, is refreshing and liberating. For those Unitarians who see themselves as firmly within the Christian

tradition, this book gives a justification for a distinctive Unitarian position within Christianity. For other Unitarians, this book is a cohesive explication of the necessity of retaining the Christian element within the movement.

This book is a must for ministerial students who may need resources to understand more of their Christian tradition. The book is a valuable source of help to new Unitarians who may have entered the movement through a more radical congregation. The book is certainly of value to more established Unitarians who need a reminder of what made us so distinctive a movement and set us apart from traditional denominations. David Doel has, once again, done the Unitarian movement a great service and I hope this work receives the attention it well deserves.

**Order a copy from:** Cathy Fozard, 20 Handforth Rd., Wilmslow, Cheshire. SK9 2LU. Tel. 01625 533110. email: cathy@fozard.com Price £8.00 + £1.00 p&p

**The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall is Minister at Dean Row and Hale Barns in Cheshire.**



## A communion service open to all

### **BOOK REVIEW: *The Nadder Valley Inclusive Worship Service***

by Lucy Ann Harris (Lulu Enterprises, 2009).  
(ISBN 978-1-4452-2148-9).

*Jean Bradley* finds much to commend in a new worship book.

Unitarian and Liberal Christian members of our churches and chapels sometimes see the Eucharist or Communion service as problematic. Broadly speaking, most Unitarians wish to celebrate the Eucharist as the Agape or love feast, dealing with the simple image of the Last Supper, where we see Jesus sitting around the table with his followers, sharing food and drink, and using that basic sustenance as an analogy for the ministry and teachings of Jesus, asking that they and he be remembered.

The word Eucharist is derived from the Greek meaning to give thanks, and most of us would appreciate an uncomplicated service that could be used and adapted for church services or small fellowship gathering. I believe that Lucy Harris, a Unitarian who lives near Salisbury, has written a very useful and open-minded communion service in which she has created space for prayers (which include a form of confessional) and for each participant to bring themselves into the presence of the holy.

This worship service is named after the Nadder Valley, where it was written and first held. This is a rural valley around the River Nadder in south-west Wiltshire, in the south of England.

Lucy Harris makes clear in the introduction that her service offers a welcome to all people, whatever their faith, and to those who do not belong to any faith community. Children are also welcomed as long as they have an understanding of the service. Her aim is to allow the participants to share the essential gift of togetherness – sharing in bread and water and the presence of the divine.

The service starts with silence and the lighting of a candle which is generally accepted in most Unitarian chapels, but interestingly a second candle is lit and passed round before being placed on a table or stand. I feel that this ritual gives a greater sense of involvement to worship.

I believe the *Nadder Valley Inclusive Worship Service* would be a valuable aid to worship. One of its great advantages is that the wording can be amended and that each fellowship or congregation could make it their own.

On a personal note, I feel that a fixed liturgy may be a little too much for the worshipper, as following the words and being ready to read their part can reduce the sense of the spiritual, and it may become a formal ritual rather than a sacred experience. I believe that the leader or Minister should take the chief responsibility which would then allow the congregation the opportunity to find their own meaning in the service.

A very interesting and liberal book of worship. I would recommend it throughout our Unitarian denomination.

**How to get copies:** Lucy Harris writes: ‘If a set of bound, colour-printed booklets is wanted for group use they are available at near cost price of £8 a copy plus P&P through lulu.com. The text is also available as a free download, also from lulu.com. The service may eventually become available through bookshops. At present, it is only available through the Internet.’

**The Rev Jean Bradley is Retreats Officer for the UCA. Her most recent ministry was at Padiham in Lancashire.**



## FORTHCOMING EVENTS, 2010

**Sat 17th July: UCA Summer Meeting,**  
Golders Green Unitarians, north London.

**Fri 18th to Sun 20th June: UCA Retreat**  
in Staffordshire (see box below for details).

**Sat 4th to Tues 7th September:**

**International Association for Religious Freedom Congress in Kerala, India**  
(for details, contact Richard Boeke at r.boeke@virgin.net or on 01403 257 801).

**Sat 30th October: UCA Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture,**  
Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

## THE UCA RETREAT

After sending emails and letters to members who expressed interest in retreats last year, I now have only a few places still available for this Retreat. The Retreat Centre is in a beautiful and tranquil part of the country in Staffordshire, just two miles from the Derbyshire border. The grounds hold 60 different species of trees, there is an abundance of wildlife and even a herd of red deer. Besides a comfortable sitting room for us to gather in, there is a summer house available to us, as well as secluded areas with seating for quiet meditation and an area for outdoor worship.

**Its website is at: [www.hartleywoods.co.uk](http://www.hartleywoods.co.uk)**

The Retreat will be held on the weekend of June 18th - 20th, Friday night to Sunday lunch, and with full board will cost £100. If you are interested in attending, please remember I can only book on a first-come first-served basis. So please send me a cheque for either the whole amount of £100, or one for £50 and pay the balance later. Write the cheque to Unitarian Christian Association and enclose your full name, address and/or email address so that I can acknowledge your payment.

I look forward to hearing from you,

**The Rev Jean Bradley (UCA Retreats Officer)** (address on back page).

# **UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION**

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