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Can God be personal?

Editor: The Rev Jim Corrigan

80 Holly Park Road, London N11 3HB

Email: jim@corrigan.myzen.co.uk Tel: 020 8361 1843

Website: www.unitarianchristian.org.uk

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Cover Photo: : *The Creation of Adam, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel*

Editorial: How Christian?

A dilemma facing liberal Christians in our increasingly diverse denomination is how to bear witness to our faith. Some veer between strident criticism of all we disapprove of, and complete withdrawal from the affairs of our General Assembly. *But there is a third option:* to engage creatively with the debates in our ranks, reaching out to all Unitarians with a view to deepening understanding and spiritual awareness.

So it is heartening that two members of our Association in the south of England are beginning an imaginative programme of services in response to the Hibbert Report on the future of liberal religion in Britain.



Jim Corrigan

This Report last year was a serious attempt to analyse where we Unitarians are and where we should be going – and as such it should be strongly welcomed, even though liberal Christians may well disagree with key conclusions – as our Moderator's Letter makes clear. (The Report – *Shaping the Future* – is available at: www.TheHibbertTrust.org.uk)

So now, Jef Jones, lay leader at Brighton Unitarians, and Dr Brian Hick, chair of Hastings congregation, are to begin monthly services on challenges raised by Hibbert, at their churches over the next year. We hope to carry an account of these in coming editions of *The Liberal Christian Herald*.

The future of our denomination was very much to the fore too at valedictory services for ministerial students at Oxford this past summer. Jim Corrigan and Sheena Gabriel asked where we were heading in homilies based on Biblical passages illustrating pastoral and prophetic aspects of ministry. They each suggested that, without a renewal of faith, survival seems unlikely – their contributions appear in this edition.

Clearly though, faith is linked to how one views the Divine, and we are delighted to carry an article by Paul Ewart, professor of atomic and laser physics at Oxford. He asserts – paradoxically – that the latest understandings of physics, and of Chance, do not negate the concept of a ‘personal God’ – they perhaps even make such a God more likely.

The defence of ‘trinitarian understandings’ of the Divine offered in our last issue by the veteran Unitarian Universalist minister Carl Scovell, has provoked a trinity of responses! While Bill Darlison and Brinley Price seek to show that Trinitarian approaches can enrich Unitarian understandings (at least when taken poetically), George De Gay offers a well-argued defence of Unitarian Christianity. This is welcome, and no doubt his views are shared by many members. But we differ from Mr De Gay over his suggestion that Trinitarian views are not compatible with membership of our denomination. That has never been the case. Unlike the Transylvanian Unitarians, our denomination in Britain never adopted a Unitarian orthodoxy – we stressed instead we were a *free faith*. That is why we are named Unitarian and *Free Christian*. The Free Christians were those who wanted to create the broadest possible church open to Unitarians, Trinitarians and all people of goodwill.

This point was cogently argued by Cliff Reed in a recent sermon (an extract of which appears in this Autumn edition under the heading *The Free Christian Tradition*). His contribution illustrates why liberal Trinitarians should not only be accepted, but in fact *welcomed* into our denomination.

Social justice remains at the heart of our work, and Andrew Brown’s Open Letter is an inspiring example of this. More widely, leaders of our Unitarian Christian Association continue to engage energetically with our wider denomination, particularly in this area. Recent successes include victory for the campaign by Oldham Unitarians (ably led by our Moderator) for the right of two asylum-seekers to remain in Britain, and the magnificent achievement of raising £5,000 – in record time -- for a Christian Aid project for mothers and babies in Sierra Leone (increased by European Union funding to £20,000). Many thanks to all those who supported these endeavours.

Finally, my warm thanks to Brian Hick of Hastings Unitarians for handling the editorial production of this issue. Do enjoy it!

The Rev Jim Corrigan begins as Minister to Ipswich and Framlingham Unitarians from 1st October 2012.

Moderator's Letter: Shaping the future?



Bob Pounder

I was asked what I thought about the recently published Hibbert Trust report on the future of Unitarianism and Liberal religion. Titled *Shaping the Future* I think this report gives insight into the thinking that shapes current modes of thought and worship styles. I say this because the 2012 General Assembly meetings seemed to reflect the new liberal religious zeitgeist. With little exception, at the main events, there was no positive representation of our Christian faith at all. This actually, is a matter of fact.

The Hibbert Trust Report contains telling phrases and ideas such as 'the privatisation of religion', '*Brand Recognition*' and the need to '*Aggressively market ceremonies*'. We should know that such phrases are borrowed from the vocabulary of modern capitalism. This report has assimilated the ideology of this language. In this scenario, religion it seems is for private consumers, it has become another commodity. In fact, the report claims that 'Unitarianism is now a private, individualised practice'.

The elevation of the individual in this report is all too apparent, concluding wrongly, in my opinion, that the reversal of Unitarian institutional decline may be reversed by tapping into 'the reservoir of private spirituality'. This is not a way forward but a retreat into consolation and an acceptance of irrelevance. The Christian message differs fundamentally from this pessimism, and whilst we may welcome insights from other religions, we are not ambivalent about God. Neither do we need a pick & mix religion.

More importantly, we know that with a religious faith comes responsibility. Jesus taught that we should worship God and serve the world; 'love your neighbour as yourself', he said. Many Unitarians long for the excitement and inclusion that comes through social action and The Parable of the Widow's Mite shows that we are never too poor or insignificant to engage in meaningful action. We should remember also, that neither should we conform to the patterns of the world.

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



Is God personal?

Atomic Physicist *Paul Ewart* considers the intriguing possibility that chaos and chance may make a personal deity more likely.

It is commonly accepted that the Biblical idea of a Creator was a major factor in the development of modern science in Western Europe. The God of the Bible depicted in Genesis is a God of order; nature exists for his purpose and not at the whim of capricious gods. Hosea declared that the regular harvests were the gift of the God of Israel, not the reward for pagan sacrifices. Psalm 19 proclaims that *the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.*

St Paul in Romans 1 says what can be known about God; *his invisible nature, eternal power and deity* is plain to see in the things he has made. Many of the first scientists in the Royal Society agreed that God revealed himself not only in the book of his word but also in the book of his world.



Paul Ewart

One of the greatest triumphs of the scientific revolution was Newton's discovery that the laws of physics on earth applied also to the heavenly bodies. The universe was a cosmic clockwork machine. Its regularity and dependability reflected a faithful dependable God. However this, amongst other factors, led to the notion that God was outside the machine – and it could operate without him. Thus developed Deism – God was remote and irrelevant. Theism tried to rescue an immanent and transcendent God but brought a classical view of God influenced by Greek philosophy as well as the Bible. Theism's God is immaterial, omniscient, almighty and immutable. Both theism and deism are inherently deterministic. God controls every detail of every event. The theological car crash that then happens is that God is responsible for evil and suffering. This seemed to be a particular problem for Einstein. He was a resolute determinist and remained sceptical of Quantum Theory's claim to be a complete description of nature saying, *God does not play dice.* He expressed his deterministic worldview as follows:

Everything is determined...by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust - we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.

Since God is thus responsible for everything, including evil, he would be passing judgment on himself. This, said Einstein, was incoherent and so he rejected the idea of a personal god.

The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naïve.

The interesting question that arises in my mind is this; if determinism implies God is not personal would indeterminism imply God is personal? Clearly the logic of this is not completely rigorous but it points us in an interesting direction.

In order to explore this idea further, I'd like to examine the role of chance in modern Science. Everyone nowadays knows about the role of random mutations in evolution. But such randomness is deeply fundamental to Quantum Theory in Physics - the best theory of anything that mankind has ever had by a long, long way. It rears its head also in meteorology in the form of Chaos theory; and we all know about the unpredictably random nature of the Stock Market.

There are basically two kinds of chance – one sort arises because we don't know enough or aren't clever enough to predict outcomes. This is Epistemological Chance. The other is the type where, even when we think we know all that's relevant, things seem to happen for no reason at all. This is Ontological chance e.g. the sort we find in Quantum Theory of radioactivity, where the time at which of any particular atom decays is completely unpredictable. From the viewpoint of belief in a Creator God, in complete control of the world, the worst case scenario is that ontological chance genuinely exists i.e. there may be events that not even God can predict. So we will keep both types of chance in play and not distinguish them in what follows.

There is a stronger challenge to God based on chance that underpins the New Atheism. It was first put in recent times by Jacques Monod, the evolutionary biologist in his book, *Chance and Necessity*:

Man at last knows he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe out of which he has emerged by chance.

This idea has been taken up by Professor Dawkins and others for it assumes that anything relying on chance can't have a purpose – hence evolution by chance shows there is no God. The argument is granted by Creationists and Intelligent Design advocates for, to them, chance means there is no design and no designer God. Most Christian theologians, and classical theists, also deny the reality of chance, for then God would not be in control, he would not be sovereign. Calvin is a case in point:

There is nothing cheaper than a sparrow ... and yet God's eye is upon it, and nothing happens to it by chance. Will he then who looks after sparrows, neglect to watch over the lives of men?

For atheists, chance is real and God is a delusion. For Creationists and classical theists, God is real and chance is a delusion. I am going to suggest to you that they may all be

wrong. Chance is real and so is God. What is more, perhaps we can learn something about the nature of God from the fact that he makes a universe where chance is allowed such an important role. The reality of chance, however, seems to imply that God, if he exists, is not in control.

For some people the existence of suffering means God is not in control. Of course this problem of theodicy is huge and I'm not claiming to solve it here, but I think it may help to challenge some of the hidden assumptions that lie behind this way of thinking. Clearly, from a logical point of view, it is perfectly possible for there to be suffering and for God to be in control. As Einstein pointed out – this would make God responsible for the suffering. And if that was all that could be said then God would be a monster and unworthy of our worship.

For me, an even more troubling aspect of suffering is not its existence but its randomness. It seems so chaotic and unfair. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a widely read book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He concluded that stuff happens for no reason; God doesn't do anything to stop it because he can't. It's just the way things are. Therefore God is not omnipotent so he is not responsible for the bad things. Now Rabbi Kushner wrote out of his own experience of suffering in his family – the death of his son from a strange and distressing illness. Whilst his suffering demands our sensitivity it does not validate his conclusion. Another Rabbi, Yitchok Kirchner, has given a Jewish critique.

If God is not responsible for the bad neither can he be credited with the good.

And so God would be irrelevant to our lives.

The question seems to be, *Would a good creator leave anything to chance?* My answer is a qualified *yes* for I want to suggest that chance may actually be necessary if God is to be in control. To see why God might want to include an element of chance or chaos in Creation I want first to explain how chance can be a positive benefit. We are all familiar with randomness in evolution – this can be argued to be the most efficient way in which life can develop by exploring all the possibilities allowed by physical laws. The advantage is that life develops a robust ability to deal with unexpected changes in the environment. Our immune systems work precisely because random mutations allow the body to find antigens to strange and unfamiliar infections.

But another feature of randomness was for me a kind of epiphany – the discovery that random processes are not always associated with decay and disorder. It involves an example of chance and its effect on determinism in Physics. Quantum Theory is often thought to be inherently indeterministic, but this gives a false impression. Quantum Theory is actually extremely deterministic. When the equations tell us that the probability of something happening is zero – it means just that, Zero! The outcome in such cases is entirely predictable – it never happens. One example is the case of a quantum jump when an atom absorbs two photons of light energy at the same time. Now the atom can't tell the difference between the order (photon 1)+(photon 2) and (photon 2)+(photon 1). They have

the same probability in Quantum Theory but the opposite sign so they cancel out and the quantum jump doesn't happen. This is called quantum interference. However if the photons are a bit random then this quantum inference is destroyed and the jump is allowed. So something is created only when things are a bit chaotic! The take-home message is that chance destroys determinism, creation is no longer held in its iron grip and it gains some freedom to go different paths.

Chance can then have a creative function. We may even find this in the Genesis account where *the deep* or *waters*, in Hebrew symbolism standing for chaos, were created out of nothing – i.e. chaos was part of creation. The question then arises *How can God be sovereign, and in control, if chance is real?* I now want to show you how God can be sovereign only if chance is real. Let's return to the problem of suffering and its hardest aspect – its randomness. I am suggesting that randomness is not just part of the problem but a clue to its solution. There may be a sound reason why chance is part of God's creative plan.

The context is that we have three independent things to take into account: chance, laws of Nature and free will. Let's assume for the moment that all three are real. Now consider the alternative to random suffering – suffering only as a moral desert. In other words, bad things happen only to bad people. Now if, with free will, we choose to do evil to someone, then God must intervene to stop it. That would mean that the laws of Nature would have to be suspended, at least locally. And if everything is to be absolutely fair and just, God must do the same thing every time we act the same way. Thus, if God gives us free will, he must then re-act to our actions in a predictable way. God is no longer sovereign. However, consider if things are not totally predictable; randomness is built into the fabric of reality so that we can't always predict what will happen or know for sure it was an act of God. As Einstein once said, *Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous*. Real ontological chance thus can isolate God from our actions, there is no deterministic chain of events that we can initiate that will always force God to act in a way he does not choose. So chance prevents us from exploiting God's consistent nature and allows him to stay in ultimate control.

To see how this works, consider this analogy. Computer programs are totally deterministic - this is what makes them so reliable, but this makes them also vulnerable to a malicious hacker or virus that can trap a programme in an endless loop so it never finishes its task. A clever programmer can build in a random process that will make the computer jump out of the loop and carry on to finish. Randomness protects from the evil hacker and the programmer stays in control.

However, if we can't control God because of chance doesn't this mean also he can't control things either? The same problem arises with free will: how can our will be genuinely free if God is controlling everything? William James uses a helpful analogy in which we play chess against an infinitely wise Grandmaster. We are free to move within the laws of the game and there are zillions of possible moves to choose from. But no matter what we do – the Grandmaster always wins. Perhaps something like this operates also in Nature. Nature can make random moves, within the laws of physics, yet God can

always adapt his actions to take these into account. Thus God does not cause the events but uses whatever happens to bring about his purpose in the end. So chaos is still consistent with God being in control. I believe this greatly enlarges our vision of God. He is not a 'one game' player, rigidly sticking to 'plan A' and pulling all the strings to make it turn out exactly as he predestines. He is a truly infinite being who can play all possible games and still win. John Sanders puts it thus:

God has the love, wisdom, perseverance and power to deal with any situation that arises as [he] carries out his creational project.

Returning to Calvin's view of the micromanaging God overseeing the fall of every sparrow, he is referring to Matthew 10:29

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?
And not one of these will fall to the ground without your Father ...*

Various Biblical translations then insert *wills* or *knows* but there is nothing in the Greek. In the vision I am presenting of God I am happy to leave this blank, or perhaps put in *knows* for God will not only know what is happening, he is with the sparrow when it falls.

When I taught my children to ride a bicycle, at first I held the saddle and ran alongside them. Gradually, as they learned to adjust their balance, I let go but kept my hand close to the saddle. They thus learned to cope with genuinely random bumps and wobbles – only that way could they learn properly to ride the bike. As I live with God, I find this is a bit like what he does for me and for others. Psalm 16 puts it beautifully;

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; thou holdest my lot....
I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall
not be moved*

The context of Matthew 10 is Jesus' teaching about the dangers of persecution facing his followers. The promise he gives is that, no matter what happens, they will come to no eternal harm. The poet Rupert Brook faced the dangers of death from random bullets and bombs in the trenches of the First World War. He puts Christ's promise of eternal safety thus:

*Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death's endeavour,
Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.*

So what does chaos in Creation tell us about the character of God? I think it tells us that he has made a world where we have to live with uncertainty. He asks us to live by faith not by sight. By learning to trust him – by committing ourselves to follow him – we discover that our hope lies in him, not in mere physical survival. So we are invited to enter a relationship and relationships are formed between persons who experience love and

grace in the unpredictable ups and downs of life. Chaos then points us to a God who desires a personal relationship with us. We experience a personal God in seeing that chance has a creative purpose; it allows order in nature but it also prevents order from dominating the world and it safeguards God's ultimate control. Finally, as each of us stumbles through life in randomly different ways, we have a truly unique experience of God as a person, especially if we commit ourselves to him through his most intimate revelation in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Professor Paul Ewart is Head of Atomic and Laser Physics at the University of Oxford. This paper was originally given as a lecture at the Ministerial Old Students Association meetings at Oxford in late June 2012.



More Thoughts on the Trinity

In the summer edition we reprinted Carl Scovell's forty year old article on the Trinity, and the response indicates that the issue is as alive today as it was then.

1 – George de Gay considers the traditional approach towards Jesus taken by Unitarians.

For many years Unitarian Christians have struggled to maintain their identity; the absence of a creed having allowed an influx of humanist and other beliefs.

Now it seems our identity is to be challenged yet again for we are simply to be listed under the title *Liberal Christian*.

Well, we may sometimes find ourselves in agreement with Liberal Christians and certainly should be on close friendly terms with them, but there is a very important difference between us. Despite being generally creedless, there is one theological point where, if we are true to our name and also true to those who suffered for our faith in the past, we are not free, but are bound. Our name means that we are non-trinitarian, which in turn means

that we believe that Jesus was a normal human-being, with no abnormal relationship to the divine, a unique belief in Christianity. When Jesus was on home ground, he was called *The carpenter's son* (Mat 13:55) and *Joseph's son* (Lk 4:22). Peter, who would have known Jesus as well as anybody, called him in his early preaching *A man singled out by God* (Acts 2:22) and *God's servant* (Acts 3:13), a term also used for Jesus in the very early Christian book, *The Didache*, where it was also used, to describe King David, who was very definitely an ordinary human being.

Jesus must have had a wonderful personality, being perceptive, wise, kindly and caring. As a Jew, he was brought up with a knowledge of the Jewish scriptures, which he summarised as *The Law and the Prophets*. He must have received a lot of inspiration from them. He was however different from the former prophets, who seem to have been rather gloomy. He on the other hand loved life. He was very aware of nature and cared about humanity. He summed up his teaching in the two great commandments, *Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself*. His finest parable, *The Good Samaritan*, showed how broadly he interpreted the word *neighbour*. He spent a lot of time in communion with God. That did not indicate a more than human relationship.

St Paul talking to the Athenians stated that God was not far from each one of us.

Jesus told the woman at the well in John (4:24-25) that God was Spirit and that his worshippers should worship him in spirit and in truth. This means that we can call God *The Holy Spirit*, a sexless term, without getting involved with notions about a trinity. It also means that we too have spirits. In other words, our higher natures have access to that same non-physical dimension where God is.

Jesus also said (Mat 6:8) *Your father knows what your needs are before you ask him*. It would seem that in the spiritual dimension, communion is natural and direct; between ourselves and the Holy Spirit, through prayer and meditation, and between the Holy Spirit and ourselves by the *inner light*.

This is far from the picture of a distant anthropomorphic God, requiring a mediator, as portrayed by the Rev Scovell. We can only make man the centre of things as he suggests, by relegating God to the back of our minds or consciously rejecting the idea of God, something possible to folk of any faith.

If anyone is timid about this, the most natural and most reasonable of all forms of Christianity, then let them reflect on Judaism, Sikhism and Islam, three strong faiths, whose founders have never been considered to be anything but simply human.

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



2 - Brinley Price considers the influence of language and number. Can God have three modes of being?

‘The Sun and the Rain were arguing. The Sun blamed the Rain for the floods, and the Rain blamed the Sun for the droughts. They couldn’t see each other’s point of view. Only the Rainbow, their lovechild, understood the depth of their attraction. She said, “You need at least three ways of experiencing the world before you can begin to understand what reality might be. All miracles require a shift in perspective.”’¹

I believe the problem for us today lies in a change in the meaning of the word *person* over the past four hundred years. The word in ancient Latin meant an actor’s mask (*persona*); therefore ‘God in three persons’ meant three ‘roles’ or ‘operations’ of the One Being (*substantia*). Obviously it is absurd and a contradiction-in-terms to speak of God as having one being and, at the same time, three persons in the modern sense of the word: one being (person) and three persons (beings). Such is *tritheism* not trinitarianism.

The Christianity of late Antiquity, under the influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism, was faced with a need to explain how a transcendent and ineffable Godhead could relate to, act within and be known by the material Creation. How could the transcendent be immanent, the eternal within time, the infinite within space, the formless within the formed, the indivisible within the divisible? The Trinity was an attempt to answer this question.

In his book *De Trinitate* Augustine of Hippo, himself a Christian Platonist, argued that the higher ‘rational’ soul operated in three ways – consciousness, understanding and will – and was an image of the Holy Trinity. Just as it is possible for a human being to be one self but to be aware s/he is, understand that s/he is and will that s/he is, it is possible for God to have one being but three modes of being, or three ‘persons’.² The medieval scholastics developed Augustine’s psychological analogy and asserted that the Father was divine Power, the Son divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit divine Love. One could reverse the order and see the Father as Love and the Spirit as Power. But the Son being God’s Wisdom ties in with the prologue of John’s Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word [Gk *Logos*: reason] and the Word was of God and the Word was God’ (I:1).

It is important that we distinguish the ‘persons’ of God from mere divine attributes. If the Godhead is *the noun*, the three ‘persons’ are not three adjectives but three verbs: God ruling, God knowing and God loving. The adjectives/attributes are the visible signs of God in the Creation, His/Her powerful, wise and good dispensation. If, as someone wrote, ‘God is not noun but all verb’ (the verb *to be* perhaps), the ‘persons’ are not just adverbs but verbs still. It is also important to see the ‘persons’ as in relation to each other, as Augustine stressed: God’s power is divine and loving, His/Her wisdom is powerful and loving and His/Her love is wise and powerful. In biblical terms knowing and loving are synonymous. To one medieval mystic (was it Julian of Norwich?) God manifested as ‘Life, Light and Love’ and that is my preferred formulation of the Trinity.

Why *three* ‘persons’? Why not, as quoted in Carl Scovell’s article, ‘one or four, Or less or more’?³ I would answer that this is due to the mystical significance of the number three.

The number two is the number of *division*, a word etymologically related to *devil*, *evil* and *diabolical*. Number four is the number of the material Creation, Nature: four elements, four directions of space, four dimensions, four seasons, four quarters of the day, etc. Three is a return to the unity and indivisibility of the One, after the disunity and divisibility of the two. Besides, following the law of Occam's Razor, why multiply entities unnecessarily and have four or more 'persons'? Three, after all, is company!

While I agree there is scant biblical evidence for the Trinity, the ultra-Pauline, Hellenistic Gospel of John is actually *binitarian*! In it the Father is the transcendent ineffable Godhead (unknown save through the Son), the Logos-Word and the Holy Spirit the two 'persons'. This shows the influence of Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Hellenistic Jew, who combined the idea of Logos in Classical philosophy with the concept of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible: both taught that God creates and binds together the world through an intelligent principle. As James D.G. Dunn notes, Philo himself described the Logos-Word as 'the Son of God'.⁴

We should not confuse 'the Son of God' in Philo's sense with the biblical notion that the Messiah, the divinely anointed king of Israel and the nations, was God's son by adoption. John writes that Jesus Christ is 'the Word made flesh' but he never calls Jesus of Nazareth *the Word itself*, thus never claims that the historical person of Jesus is God *per se*.⁵ Unfortunately this is exactly what happened during the early years of Christianity: a gradual conflation of 'the Son of God' in the Hellenistic Jewish sense with 'the Son of God' in the Palestinian Jewish sense. On the other hand, John seems to imply that all human beings can become adopted children of God or 'born of God' and that the Logos-Word is immanent throughout the material Creation (I:10, 12-13).

But why does there need to be biblical evidence for the Trinity anyway, if 'revelation is not sealed'? Christianity is not just God's Word spoken through Jesus of Nazareth but spoken through countless many who have followed him and modelled their lives, even their deaths, on his. We can all become children born of God and the Logos-Word is always within us, even though it sleeps within the present darkness of our minds. I still find the Trinity a useful concepts, though not an entirely necessary one. The religion of Jesus is more important than the religion about Jesus. But the latter can enrich the former, especially for those whose approach to Christianity is more philosophical or poetic.

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² St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, introd. and trans. Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1991), passim.

³ Carl Scovell, 'Is there Truth in the Trinity', *The Liberal Christian Herald*, No. 73 (Spring and Summer, 2012), p.25.

⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Did the first Christians Worship Jesus?: the New Testament Evidence*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.120.

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



3 - Bill Darlison considers the need for a God of involvement and mystery.

Einstein said that the most important question a human being can ask is: Is the universe a friendly place? This is indeed the ultimate existential question, and while we may not ask it every day, and while we may not ask it in precisely this form, there can be few of us who, in those troubled and sleepless early morning hours, have not striven to find answers to this, the deepest of life's perplexing riddles. Is there some point to my life, or is it, in the end, just 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'? And, as I can most certainly testify, when faced with the prospect of imminent death, the question is asked with a great deal more urgency than formerly, and the answers one considers are of more than passing intellectual interest. Those student posturings in late-night conversations over endless cups of coffee now seem vacuous and irrelevant: what one demands from oneself at times of crisis is honesty; the evasions and rhetoric of point-scoring debate on the meaning of life's brief candle are no longer satisfying when that candle is on the point of being snuffed out.



Bill Darlison

While we have our health and strength we can often approach this question in a slightly dishonest way. It is common for men particularly to deny that life has any ultimate meaning. All that God stuff is for wimps, we say. Life just is, and, unfortunately, it's tragic. There's even a kind of sophisticated nihilism that some try to cultivate, a kind of coffee-and-absinthe existentialism, which, for some reason, seems to be very appealing to women, and is more of a strategy for getting laid (as the children say nowadays) than a genuine attempt to answer the big questions. But our actions often belie our rhetoric; our words (particularly in argument) do not always tell the truth about how we really feel. Woody Allen captured this perfectly when he said, 'Life is painful, tragic, and burdensome, and, unfortunately, it is all over far too quickly!' I was once arguing about the meaning of life with a man who took the pessimistic line. He said that to abort a child was actually to do it a favour since to bring it into the world was to burden it with unbearable existence. His reasoning was very similar to that of John Paul Sartre – a real coffee-and-absinthe existentialist – in his novel *The Age of Reason*. About an embryo, he has one of the characters say: 'A child; another consciousness, a little-centre point of light that would flutter round and round, dashing against the walls, and never be able to escape.' Unfortunately for my friend's argument, his wife, who was sitting by his side at the time, was actually six months pregnant! What price consistency? Philip Larkin, in the last line of his most quoted poem, has it right: if you really find life terrible – as he apparently did – then 'don't have any kids yourself.' And, as Mr. Micawber declared, life need never be burdensome to a man who has access to shaving equipment.

It might be supposed that having a religious approach to life would indicate that one perceived the universe as friendly, but this supposition would be wrong. There are types

of Christianity which are decidedly pessimistic, but Buddhism is perhaps the clearest example of a world religion which actually starts from the premise that life is tragic. The Four Noble Truths teach that all life involves suffering; that suffering is caused by desire; and that suffering will cease when desire has been suppressed. The object of Buddhist practice is to attain Nirvana, a state in which all desire ceases, no more karma is generated, and rebirth is no longer necessary. For all it is the most compassionate of philosophies (I have never met an unkind Buddhist, nor, strangely, an unhappy one), it is, as far as I can discover from my (not very extensive) study of it, essentially a method of escape from the cruelties and sufferings that are inherent in life itself. Christianity and Buddhism have many things in common, and it seems likely that early Christian thought was, to some extent, influenced by Buddhist teachings, which, remember, were already five hundred years old at the time of Christ, but the two religions are essentially very different. Christianity seeks to transform the world and to ameliorate its suffering; Buddhism seeks to transcend the world and to avoid its suffering. The hope of the Christian life is the resurrection of the body, the continuance in some form or another of the conscious self: the aim of Buddhist striving is the annihilation of the conscious self, the extinction of all separateness. Buddhism purports to have a method whereby that isolated fragment of consciousness which so troubled John Paul Sartre may be released from its prison: Christianity contends that the atom of consciousness is an embryonic child of God with a glorious eternal destiny.

In most of its forms Buddhism is atheistic, and so the question of purpose in creation is really a redundant one. Is belief in God, then, a prerequisite to a belief that the universe is friendly and purposeful? Perhaps it is, but even this needs qualifying. Not all conceptions of God are benevolent. Many people profess a belief in a God who simply wound up the world at the beginning of time and then left it to its own devices. This was summed up rather neatly in the piece of graffiti that appeared here and there in the sixties: 'God is not dead. He just doesn't want to get involved!' This, substantially, is Deism, the influential religious philosophy of the 18th century which denied revelation, miracles, supernaturalism, and, of course, life after death. God was kept as a kind of philosophical First Cause, but God had no more involvement in the world than a clockmaker has in the continuing life of one of his clocks. Deism was very appealing to Unitarians like Thomas Jefferson, and is still around in Unitarian circles, although one would like to ask the difference between an indifferent God who has hung a 'gone fishing' notice on his door, and no God at all. I, for one, wouldn't cross the street to worship such a God.

In addition to the absent God of Buddhism, and the indifferent God of Deism there is also the evil God of certain strands of Gnostic thought. Now, Gnosticism is a very appealing philosophy to me, at least it is in so far as it stresses knowledge of God through direct experience, but there were Gnostic thinkers in the ancient world – in the second and third centuries of the Christian era particularly – who proposed that the creator of the world was actually less than good. If you think about it you will realise that this is a very neat way of explaining the evil we find around us in the world; if one believes that God is good, then the presence of evil is an almost insuperable problem, as generations of Christian thinkers have found. But, if one believes that the creator is less than good, then the problem ceases to be a problem; evil is just the natural result of a world created by an incompetent or malicious deity.

What these thinkers proposed was, in essence, as follows. There is an Eternal God who is so pure, holy, good, and self-contained that It cannot possibly sully Itself by involvement with matter, but from this God – or Godhead – has proceeded a series of ‘emanations’, each one less perfect and less holy than the one before it. These were called ‘archons’, or powers, the last of these is, in Yossarian’s words in *Catch 22*, ‘the bungling hayseed’ of a creator who thought it a good idea to create a world ‘containing tooth decay and phlegm’. Fortunately, however, each human being contains a spark of the true Godhead, and the object of religious practice is to free this spark from the matter which imprisons it, to let it escape from the evil creation and be united with the Godhead once more. Shades of Buddhism here, and it is more than likely that the same perception of the world as a hostile place lay behind both Buddhism and pessimistic Gnosticism.

It was against this sort of background that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity came to be forged. It is true that the Bible contains no unequivocal statement about the Trinity, and, to Jewish sensibilities, it would have been completely anathema. Our Unitarian forebears found the doctrine incomprehensible and logically nonsensical which, of course, from a purely rational point of view, it is. But religious statements in general will crumble when subjected to rational assessment. All religion is poetry, and the rules of poetry are not the rules of logic. As a non-logical, poetic insight, the paradoxical doctrine of the Trinity leads to an acknowledgement that God is beyond the comprehension of the feeble human mind. God is, and will always remain, a mystery. But, more significant than this, at least from the point of view of our present concerns, is what the doctrine of the Trinity tells us about the world. It answers Einstein’s question in the affirmative. The world, the universe, is a friendly place, it says. In mythological language (I cannot stress this enough), it affirms not just the creation of the world by God, but God’s continuing, loving, involvement with it. Jesus is not just Mary’s son, he is, according to Matthew’s Gospel, *Emmanuel* – ‘God with us’, and John’s Gospel tells us that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son’ to die on its behalf. The story of Jesus’s death on the cross expresses the conviction that God is present even in the most tragic and inexplicable and painful of events. This is not a picture of an uninvolved deity, but of one who shares our suffering. Jesus, in continuing Christian tradition, is ‘fully God and fully man’, another logical absurdity, granted, but a poetic statement of the intimate connection between human beings and the deity; in the words of the Catholic mass, ‘Christ humbled himself to share in our humanity, so that we may share in his divinity.’ And the Holy Spirit, who, by the way, is often depicted as feminine, is called the Comforter, the ever-present guiding hand of God, the source of grace and healing and consolation.

There is no God in Buddhism and no grace; just the unaided efforts of the individual to extricate himself from a pitiless universe. Deism’s God has gone to sleep and left us to clear up the mess. Gnosticism’s God is a monster who has to be outwitted. But the Christian Trinitarian God is a God of mystery, of involvement, of relationship, a God who created the world, loves the world, and is intimately involved with the salvation of the world. Strange as it may seem for a Unitarian to say this, but I think the idea of the Trinity is one of the most significant contributions that Christianity has made to religious thought. The Trinity doctrine has brought the Jewish God closer to us; He has left his home in the skies and pitched his tent among the inhabitants of the earth.

But these images are only valuable in so far as they are viewed poetically. The great mistake – made by Trinitarian and Unitarian apologists alike – is to insist that the Trinity doctrine is a mathematical statement about the very nature of God, rather than a poetic expression of a conviction about the nature of the world, and God’s relationship with the world. What repels our reason can enormously excite our imagination.

Unitarians have ever been suspicious of, perhaps even contemptuous of, the Trinitarian God of orthodox Christianity, preferring instead a simple and comprehensible God. But, a God we can understand is a God we can ignore; a God without mystery is a God without meaning. Is it any wonder then that the very notion of God seems to have gradually disappeared from the Unitarian consciousness? The step from Deism to Atheism is a short one.

But we Unitarians are, in the main, a life-affirming people. We regularly sing our thanks for the world and our gratitude for the gift of life. We perceive the universe as a friendly place, and in doing so we are more in harmony with the Trinitarian God than we may previously have been inclined to think.

Rev Bill Darlison is Minister Emeritus, Dublin Unitarian Church

**The Unitarian Christian Association
is an affiliated society of the**

**General Assembly of Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches**

which has as its Object:

*‘To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship
of God and the celebration of life;*

the service of humanity and respect for all creation;

and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.’

Oxford Homilies, June 2012

The following two homilies were given in Oxford by Sheena Gabriel and Jim Corrigan as part of the final service marking the completion of their ministerial training, before taking up posts as new Ministers.

Sheena Gabriel: Returning to the Source

Reading: Ezekiel - Chapter 37 verse 1-10 (NRSV)

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

*He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"
I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."*



Sheena Gabriel

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

This story with its powerful imagery captured my imagination as a child in the Pentecostal church in which I was raised – and continues to speak to me today. The prophet Ezekiel was writing in the context of Israel's history. In the 6th century BCE, Jerusalem was laid waste, the Temple burnt down and the Hebrew people exiled. Seemingly abandoned by Yahweh, Ezekiel's vision offered hope of renewal. But as Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer and activist, notes: "the vision of dry bones is linked to neither space or time.... its consolation, is offered to every generation...for every generation needs it - and ours more than any before us."

The vision can speak to us as individuals in times of dryness or exhaustion – the hope that the green sap of life can flow again. But for me, its real power lies in the *collective* vision – a metaphor of renewal - for our Unitarian movement. I don't want to stretch the imagery too far – I'm not implying we're just a bunch of dried out bones – but no-one would argue we've lost some of our past vitality. Despite pockets of growth, our numbers and influence have declined, so that at the start of my ministry, I ask: 'Can these bones live'?

Ezekiel's vision, articulates something of my personal hope for our future.

In the valley of dry bones, renewal comes in two parts. Ezekiel is commanded to prophecy to the bones – he does so - the bones come together; flesh appears and takes on human form – but there is no life in them. What we 'do' through human effort to reinvigorate our churches, is important – we strive to make them more attractive, to update our image. We attend to our notice boards, we dust away the cobwebs. We improve publicity and restructure our committees. These are necessary steps – but cosmetic work alone, will not bring new life.

God then commands Ezekiel to prophecy once more – this time to the four winds. The word for 'wind' in Hebrew is 'ruach' - and also translates as 'breath' 'spirit' or 'soul'. Ezekiel does as God commands - breath enters the bodies and they rise up, a living multitude. The Spirit is the missing ingredient that restores vigour to tired bones. And this, I believe, is where our challenge lies. Alfred Hall some 60 years ago declared that 'Unitarians believe first of all, and most profoundly in God.' This is no longer the case. In our efforts to be more inclusive, we are now united by shared values. And whilst I welcome the diversity of our movement, I wonder if we are in danger of cutting ourselves off from the Source – the breath that inspired our forebears.

Each generation may need to find new ways to speak of the divine – but I believe we *do* need to speak of it – and seek to connect to it - or him, her, thou... Translate the word 'God' however you wish... but unless we become channels for something larger than ourselves, I doubt new life can come to tired bones. Art Lester in his anniversary service a few years back, suggested our attrition is a symptom of failing to attend to the Soul. He said:

“When we humbly admit we need guidance, when the absence in our churches that so worries us, ceases to be the absence of new faces to take the minutes and make tea, and starts being the absence of that Spirit that inspired us in the first place, we will be found by those who are actually looking for God – not just talking about him.”

And as we consider our future, Art challenged us to do what any other religious organisation would do – to pray. I sometimes wonder if Unitarian theology puts too much emphasis on salvation by character - on human effort – “the progress of humankind onward and upward forever”. But maybe we could learn from Universalist theology - maybe Grace is more available than we think?

Of course, this doesn't mean simply praying and doing nothing. In the vision of dry bones – human effort mediates the work of the Spirit. The two part process of renewal mirrors

the two part creation story in Genesis; where Yahweh forms the first human being out of clay - and then breaths life into it. But in Ezekiel's vision Yahweh does not do this work alone - rather it is a human being that channels his creation power. The basic structures and connections need to be in place - so that the breath can inhabit them. To use another analogy, we trim the sails, make our boat seaworthy - so that we can catch the wind. The wind blows where it will - we cannot predict its course, or confine it within human schemes. But we can align ourselves to it and follow where it leads. In John's Gospel, Jesus predicts the time when people will worship not on the mountain, or at Jerusalem, but 'in spirit and in truth'. We can translate that afresh for our age - the Spirit that renews, is not the property of a single religion or denomination.

In Ezekiel's vision, the wind comes from the four corners of the earth - representing for me the Universal spirit - the one Source from whom we all draw the same breath. Perhaps it is also significant that in Hebrew - the Spirit, ruach - is also feminine... Can these bones live? We cannot predict the future of our beloved Unitarian movement, but perhaps what matters is that we remain faithful to the Spirit that inspired our forbears - and draw on that transforming power, which renews itself in every Age. To end with the words of May Sarton: "Return, return to the deep sources: nothing less will teach the stiff hands a new way to serve."

Sheena Gabriel is lay leader to Godalming Unitarians where she is shortly to become minister.

Jim Corrigan: The need for faith

Reading: John 21: 9-17

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." 'Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

HOMILY:

In this reading from John's Gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples 'for the third time' after his crucifixion – a time when he'd apparently *Risen*, but had not yet 'ascended to the Father', as he told Mary Magdalene earlier. And the Risen Jesus cooks for the disciples, feeds them and then has that extraordinary conversation with Simon Peter.

Now of course many Unitarians have problems with John's Gospel – and particularly with scenes like these. We sometimes say 'it's only metaphorical'. But I like the approach of the liberal New Testament scholar Marcus Borg. He says metaphors are not *less* than the literal truth – rather they often contain much *more* truth than mere fact. Metaphors can open the way to great spiritual truths – about ourselves, about the human condition, and about our relationship with the Divine. So, with Marcus Borg, let us say of this scene in John's Gospel: "You can believe this really happened, or you can *disbelieve* it – but the most important question is: *what does this passage mean?*" Yes, and for our lives today. I suggest that if we allow ourselves to experience John's Gospel in this spirit, we encounter a deeply mystical work.

We know that the disciples were dispirited and lost after Jesus' death – here they have returned to their old jobs as fishermen ... but without any luck. Jesus then tells them to 'cast their net on the other side', and suddenly they pull in a great haul ... and as they come ashore, Jesus is already grilling ... 'Come and have breakfast ...' and he serves them bread and fish.

And of course we can all see this as a metaphor for *spiritual* sustenance. Jesus feeds them spiritually, giving them strength. But I'd like to focus on the conversation Jesus has with Simon Peter after they finish breakfast – and it seems decidedly odd.

Jesus asks him: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?', and Simon Peter replies: 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' And then Jesus says to him: 'Feed my lambs.' Jesus repeats his questions twice more – and there are slight variations in each exchange, although they follow the same pattern.

Note that Jesus first asks Peter: 'do you love me more than these?' – more than the other disciples. Why? Is it egotism? We know that John's Gospel gives us the 'Divine Jesus' and many of us will have problems with that.

Personally, I like the definition of the Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom – he wrote that Jesus 'was so in touch with the Sacred' (with the Divine), that 'he became as one with it.' But if that doesn't work for you, just try entering into the spirit of the passage by '*suspending disbelief*' (at least '*for the moment*', to quote Coleridge). Jesus is talking to Peter – the Rock on which his Church is to be built. This is the same Peter who earlier denied three times that he knew Jesus (after his arrest). So of course, there is symmetry here – Jesus gets Peter to affirm his love three times. But is that the only reason for the repetition?

What great instruction does Jesus want to give Peter at the start of his ministry? ... ‘look after my lambs’, but above all ‘feed them’ ... give them *spiritual* food. And I take this (very much) to heart as I begin my ministry: our members want spiritual sustenance, and I hope to provide this.

There’s a spiritual hunger out there – and we must meet this need. Jesus saw this as the main task of the pastor, of ministry – and we stand in that 2,000-year-old tradition. But we mustn’t forget what Jesus demands first in each of these exchanges with Simon Peter: ‘Do you love me (more than these)?’ The effect of the repetition is, I suggest, to deepen the experience – for Peter and for ourselves as readers.

And then we understand: even more important than feeding the sheep is: ‘Do you love me (more than these)?’ Jesus is insisting that pastoral care must be grounded in love and devotion – and of course that is devotion to the Divine.

After their encounters with the Risen Christ, the disciples’ spirits begin reviving, and they are to go out into the world to spread the Gospel – in the face of hardship and persecution, with many disciples martyred, probably including Peter.

These days we often talk as though hardly anyone in Britain is interested in religion any more. But this is not true. Recently, I’ve attended evangelical and Pentecostal services in London – where hundreds, even thousands of young people flock. We may not like the message, but they offer young people *belief*, faith.

And Jesus’ message, in this passage from John, seems to be: spirituality without love of the Divine, a religion not grounded in deep faith, is unlikely to survive – not when times get hard.

This is a challenge for us as we face the future of our Church. Can we rediscover faith at least as strong as that which moved our forebears? – faith to sustain our denomination? Let us pray that we can. Amen.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sunday 14th October

Hastings Unitarian Church – start of monthly series led by Jef Jones and Dr Brian Hick exploring approaches to The Hibbert Report *Shaping the Future*

Saturday 27th October

UCA Autumn Meeting. Brighton Unitarian Church, New Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 1UF. www.brightonunitarian.org.uk

The Widow's Mite

An open letter to David Cameron from *Andrew Brown*

I want to take seriously something you said recently at a reception in Downing Street. You quoted from the Gospel of Luke and spoke of “we” Christians saying:

“This is the time when, as Christians, we remember the life, sacrifice and living legacy of Christ. The New Testament tells us so much about the character of Jesus; a man of incomparable compassion, generosity, grace, humility and love. These are the values that Jesus embraced, and I believe these are values people of any faith, or no faith, can also share in, and admire. [. . .] It is values like these that make our country what it is – a place which is tolerant, generous and caring. A nation which has an established faith, that together is most content when we are defined by what we are for, rather than defined by what we are against. In the book of Luke, we are told that Jesus said, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ – advice that when followed makes for a happier, and better society for everyone.”

With regard to the claimed marginalisation of Christianity in our contemporary culture you went on to add *“I think there’s something of a fight-back going on, and we should welcome that. The values of the Bible, the values of Christianity, are the values that we need.”*

I want to send your words back to you with a few thoughts about what you have just suggested might really mean because, make no mistake about it, any serious re-engagement with religion has serious consequences for you and for us, consequences that are both good and bad, positive and negative.

Let’s start with Bible from which you so freely quoted. It’s worth remembering here with some words of Ernst Bloch found in his powerful book *Atheism in Christianity* that:

‘There is only this point: that the Church and the Bible are not one and the same. The Bible has always been the Church’s bad conscience.’ [And although the Bible has often been used as a cattle prod to by the powerful] ‘the counter-blow against the oppressor is biblical, too, and that is why [the Bible] has always been suppressed or distorted, from the serpent on’

With this unsettling thought in mind let’s turn to one of the readings set for this Sunday in the *Revised Common Lectionary* and which will be used in any of the churches you may choose to attend today (i.e. Sunday 15 April 2012):

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:32-35)

And, from my own reading this week – I just happen to be reading Luke myself at the moment – there is the story of the widow’s mite:

“[Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said [to the disciples], ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on’” (Luke 2:1-4 and Mark 12:41-44).



*She out of her poverty,
put in all she had*

So, Mr Prime Minister, what are we to make of these values expressed by the Bible, these the values of Christianity? Are these really the values that you think we need? If so, I rejoice for after the first Easter the Apostles speak of enlarging common ownership and they do not speak of privatising the things that we already own in common, things designed to contribute to the common good or to the common wealth. The Apostles are not recorded as looking around and saying to each other let’s take these things into our own hands and turn them to our own profit. They did not because the resurrection was for them in part about understanding the whole community as the risen body of Christ (see my sermon for last Sunday - Easter Sunday) in which, as Paul said, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28) and this pluralistic, multi-cultural, multi-faith and inclusive body was, naturally, to hold all things in common ownership for the good of all. Luke, also the author of Acts, tells us this meant that there “was not a needy person among them”. Now I do not doubt that this may not always have been one-hundred percent true to the facts on the ground but neither do I doubt the idealistic intention, passion, vision and values that were calling the Apostles to this new Easter way of being together in the world.

My own great hero in this nation’s struggle to live out such a Biblical and Christian vision is Gerrard Winstanley (1609-1676). He was the leader of a radical religious movement during the English Revolution known as the Diggers who felt that the earth and its fruits

were a “Common Treasury” for all. In 1649, in protest at their poverty, they began to live and dig upon the common land of George’s Hill in Surrey. Today, this hill is a 964-acre private estate consisting of about 420 large houses, a golf course and a tennis club. It has become a very popular residential location for the wealthy where, as a cursory glance at any Estate Agent’s website will reveal, houses nearly always go for over £3,000,000. Anyway, on that former piece of common ground Winstanley memorably asked:

“Was the earth made to preserve a few covetous, proud men to live at ease, and for them to bag and barn up the treasures of the Earth from others, that these may beg or starve in a fruitful land; or was it made to preserve all her children?” (Gerrard Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousness*, 1649)

So, your words suggest to me that you are filled with the Biblical and Christian intent, passion and values of the Apostles and are, therefore, against the values of all covetous proud men and women who, then as now, live at ease whilst barning and bagging up treasures for themselves at the expense of the poor. If so then I applaud your words.

And what about the widow? When we read the text carefully we see something very, very telling. Luke tells us that Jesus noticed the rich gave out of their abundance (i.e. their excess) whilst the widow gave out of her poverty (i.e. her very substance). As the *Good News Bible* (the Bible of my Primary and Sunday School days) more clearly puts it: “the [rich] put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had – she gave all she had to live on.”

And here I must turn to the phrase we hear you say often, namely, that “we are all in this together” and that, together, we must all help to refill the nation’s coffers.

You tell us that we must all do our bit and that’s fair enough – in a genuine commonwealth I would expect nothing else. But is this really a commonwealth and is this really happening? We are told, for example, that the rich will be able best to contribute to the common wealth by being given top rate tax breaks. The money they will gain from this will then be used to encourage entrepreneurship. Perhaps this is true and it will create much new work and wealth. I have my doubts but I will, today, take you at your word and that the wealthy will, thereby, contribute more to the national coffers. But notice, and notice well, that this is a contribution being made by the wealthy only out of their already considerable abundance and excess, an abundance and excess that is in many cases increasing even as the downturn continues.

The poor and not so poor, on the other hand, are being asked to do something quite different. They must contribute to the national coffers out of their substance and not out of their excess. Their contribution is being taken directly from their weekly wages – already in many cases less than a living wage – and also through tax increases such as VAT or the extra 20% on their hot pasty at lunch which was already for them a budget meal.

Make no mistake about it, the poor's giving is not coming from out of their abundance but from their poverty, their very substance. A poverty that is in so many cases increasing as the downturn continues.

The point I am making is not that the rich person, merely by dint of being rich, is bad, or that the poor person, merely by dint of being poor, is good but something far more structurally disturbing about our society which was expressed succinctly by the writer of 1 Timothy (6:7-11). He reminded us all that:

“ . . . we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.”

You see it is the love of money that I see growing all around me that worries me so much. It is a love that all too easily distorts or suppresses what following Biblical and Christian values really entails and this encourages many, but I hope not you, to begin to turn the Biblical text and Christian values into a cattle prod to be used against the common people.

To be sure, even the distorted form of love that is the love of money is one that believes in giving, and perhaps it does give a little, but it is never enough and, worst of all, it is a giving made within an economic system which ensures that the substance of the poor and vulnerable in our society continues slowly and painfully to be eaten away while the abundance and excess of the few continues to grow. Surely here we must not forget another Biblical and Christian claim, namely, that it is the poor who are blessed and it is they who will inherit the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20).

So, you have told us that the values of the Bible, the values of Christianity, are the values that we need and, today, I will take you at your word. I will assume that you do wish to be a man of God and to shun all this greed and love of money and wish genuinely to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness so as to bless the poor.

I try to say all of this today without irony because we must always be ready to allow people the opportunity to repent and to turn around their lives, but today is not tomorrow and, as Luke also tells us Jesus said: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit” (Luke 6:43-44). Please remember, Mr Prime Minister, that all of us will be known by our fruits.

Rev Andrew James Brown is the minister at Cambridge Unitarian Memorial Church and a former Editor of The Herald.



TWO POEMS

By Brinley Price

ON A CLEAR NIGHT

Now I grow old the world shrinks small,
The stars appear less far away;
No longer to an almighty All
I, awed and wondering, fall and pray.

Now too I, as a star, grow dim,
A weary veil before my eyes,
I who once hymned with seraphim
Whose shining host filled night's vast skies;

These now a too familiar face
Eyes no more lift to gaze upon
And, if they do, those lamps of Grace
Have faded that once fiercely shone.

My spirit that would once aspire
And leap into the Infinite,
Now cannot hear Its ringing choir,
From flesh's ragged coat take flight.

Now light gives way to gravity,
Earth's chains weighing down; in faith (and fear)
I reach to a Love I cannot see
And find all fellow mortals dear.



THIS WORLD

“Lord Jesus Christ is just like me,”
Preached Lady Hardheart in her day
And Con and Tempt her sons today,
“He cursed the underclass and he
“Would now have set the Market free.”

“To be like Jesus is the Way,”
I heard a quiet lone voice say,
By Self’s gross mudslide swept away,
The roar of scribe and pharisee,
“Lord Jesus Christ is just, like me;”

“Lord Jesus Christ is just, like me,
“To judge the sinful, sad or gay,
“To lock the door and lose the key
“And to be seen to praise and pray,”
They roar, who this world’s god obey.

I wandered through its lands made grey,
Yet stopped before a hanging tree
And gazed there, when this came to me:
To love, serve, tend, forgive this clay;
To be, like Jesus, is the Way.

Turned on its head, divinity;
Turned upside down, humanity;
But to no conquering Beast a prey
God’s Kingdom sky and earth and sea:
To be, like Jesus, is the Way.

Though their ass-headed lord may bray,
His slaves, who are like him, will pay
Their debt to Love: eternity
Being death to those who dare not be
And be like Christ the Lord, the Way.



THE FREE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Why Free Christian?

An extract from a sermon by Cliff Reed, 1st July 2012

It might come as something of a surprise, bearing in mind the very long histories of some of our congregations – anything up to 350 years – that the General Assembly was only formed in 1928. What happened in that year was the merger of two distinct bodies, founded in the 19th century, and themselves incorporating the still earlier beginnings of denominational organisation.

Without going into details, the two bodies had originally represented two rather different conceptions of Unitarianism. The older of the two, the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (B&FUA), had what might be called a more ‘evangelical’ or denominational approach. It was very self-consciously ‘Unitarian’ and concerned to demonstrate and promote the biblical foundations of Unitarianism as a faith distinct from ‘orthodox’ Christianity and its doctrines, notably the Trinity. The National Conference (its short title!), on the other hand, influenced as it was by the great James Martineau, avoided what it saw as Unitarian sectarianism. It sought to embrace a broader spectrum of liberal Christians and didn’t see itself as exclusively Unitarian in theology, laying greater emphasis on the principle of ‘nonsubscription’ to set creeds and dogmas.

There was overlap between the B&FUA and the National Conference, but they followed distinct paths in the 19th and early 20th centuries, producing their own hymn books and other worship materials. By the 1920s, though, their differences seemed less important, especially in the face of the challenges presented by the First World War and its aftermath. So, in 1928, the two bodies merged to form the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Only one congregation declined to join.

It is worth noting that the ‘Free Christian’ element in the name derives from the National Conference’s wish to be a broader and more inclusive denomination than just a ‘Unitarian’ one. Liberal Trinitarians would also be welcome, both as congregations and as individuals. It is ironic that, in more recent times, there have been suggestions that we should drop the ‘Free Christian’ because, it is claimed, it is too ‘exclusive’. Suggestions, I’m afraid, based on a misunderstanding of our history. We may, for brevity’s sake, call ourselves ‘Unitarians’ most of the time, but retaining the ‘Free Christian’ part of our General Assembly’s name makes an important point of principle, not just of history. It could hardly be called ‘inclusive’ to drop it!

Rev Cliff Reed has just retired as minister for Ipswich and Framlingham.



What is the UCA?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford	Kingswood Meeting House, Hollywood
The Memorial Church, Cambridge	Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds
Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow	Nazareth Chapel, Padiham
Dob Lane Chapel, Failsworth	Norcliffe Chapel, Styal
Effra Road Chapel, Brixton	Roslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead
Flowery Field Chapel, Hyde	Stalybridge Unitarian Church
Halliwell Road Free Church, Bolton	Williamson Memorial Unitarian
Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross	Christian Church, Dundee

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

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

**For non-UCA members, annual subscriptions to
The Liberal Christian Herald cost £8.
Individual copies may be ordered too from Catherine Fozard.**

(The magazine currently comes out twice a year.)

Any queries: please contact Catherine Fozard at: cathy@fozard.com



The Rev Brian Cockroft (Honorary President)
51 Lakeview Manor, Newtownards, Co. Down. BT23 4US
Telephone 028 9180 0690 Email: tworevs@hotmail.co.uk

UCA OFFICER GROUP

The Rev Bob Pounder (Moderator)
27 Marne Avenue, Ashton-under-Lyne OL6 9DW
Telephone: 0161 339 6740 Email: bob.pounder@tesco.net

Denise Birks (Secretary)
28 Sunningdale Close, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 2LD
Telephone: 01606 558424 Email: denisegraham@talktalk.net

Catherine Fozard
(Treasurer and Membership Secretary)
20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 2LU
Telephone: 01625 533110 Email: cathy@fozard.com

The Rev Alex Bradley (Chaplain)
70 Springwood Avenue, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 8JA
Telephone: 01565 754465 Email: alexknutsford@yahoo.co.uk

The Rev Jean Bradley (Retreats Officer)
70 Springwood Avenue, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 8JA
Telephone: 01565 754465 Email: Revjeanbradley@yahoo.com

The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould (Events Officer)
4A Bulkeley Road, Handforth, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 3DJ
Telephone: 01625 403509 Email: jeffreylanegould@btinternet.com

The Rev Jim Corrigan (Herald Editor)
80 Holly Park Road, Friern Barnet, London N11 3HB
Telephone: 020 8361 1843 Email: jim@corrigan.myzen.co.uk