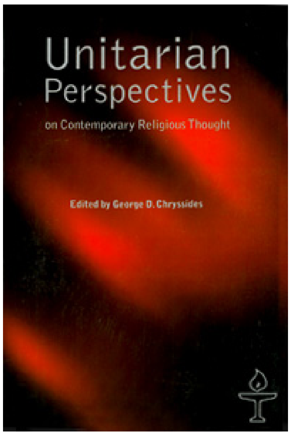
Unitarian Perspectives
on Contemporary Religious Thought



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Preface

Who are the Unitarians?

The Unitarians are a spiritual community who encourage people to think for themselves. They believe

- that everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves;
- that the fundamental tools for doing this are one's own life experience, one's reflection upon it, one's intuitive understanding, and the promptings of one's own conscience;
- that the best setting for this is a community which welcomes people for who they are, complete with their beliefs, doubts and questions.

They can be called religious 'liberals':

- 'religious' because they unite to celebrate and affirm values that embrace and reflect a greater reality than self;
- 'liberal' because they claim no exclusive revelation or status for themselves; and because they afford respect and toleration to those who follow different paths of faith.

They are called 'Unitarians'

- because of their traditional insistence on divine unity, the oneness of God;
- because they affirm the essential unity of humankind and of creation.

History in brief

The roots of the Unitarian movement lie principally in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. At that time, people in many countries across Europe began to claim

- the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves;
- the right to seek a direct relationship with God, without the mediation of priest or church;
- the right to set their own conscience against the claims of religious institutions.

Many came to question 'orthodox' Christian doctrine and to affirm beliefs of their own. These included

- the Unity or unipersonality of God, as opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity — hence the name 'Unitarian';
- the humanity, as opposed to the deity, of Christ;
- the worth of human beings, as opposed to ideas of original sin, inherited guilt and innate depravity;
- the universal salvation of all souls, as opposed to the doctrine that most of humanity is predestined to damnation.

The earliest organised Unitarian movements were founded in the sixteenth century in Poland and Transylvania. In Britain, a number of early radical reformers professed Unitarian beliefs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some suffering imprisonment and martyrdom.

An organized Unitarian movement did not emerge until the late eighteenth century. The first avowedly Unitarian church in Britain was opened in Essex Street, London, in 1774. Denominational structures were developed during the nineteenth century, finally uniting in the present General Assembly in 1928.

Today Unitarian movements exist in a number of countries around the world. Most originated independently by processes of spiritual evolution similar to that which occurred in Britain.

Introduction: From the 1950s to the Millennium

by George D. Chryssides

In 1997 the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches established a panel of advisers to oversee future publications under the imprint of the Lindsey Press. Meeting for the first time at Essex Hall, London, the Publications Panel began to survey the range of materials in print and to consider which aspects of Unitarianism needed to be addressed in the written word. Strange as it may seem, one significant gap in Unitarian publishing was theology. Perhaps the three-fold Unitarian principle of 'freedom, reason, and tolerance' has allowed individual Unitarians to go their own ways in theological matters and confined theologising to lectures, sermons, and editions of the journal Faith and Freedom. Whatever the reason, the most recent publication of a substantial volume exclusively dedicated to Unitarian theology was Kenneth Twinn's edited volume, simply entitled Essays in Unitarian Theology, which was published in 1959.

Twinn's anthology served an important purpose atthe time when itwas written. It had no shortage of prestigious contributors, such as Arthur Long, Leonard Mason, and C. Gordon Bolam, to name but three, However, reading it forty years on, one inevitably senses that it was a product of its time. Much has changed in the past forty years— intellectually, societally, and technologically. There are new issues to be addressed, new 'isms' to be evaluated, and new campaigns to be undertaken.

I can remember the year 1959 to some degree, although I was then only 14. I do not, of course, recall the appearance of Twinn's book — I do not think I had even heard of the Unitarians at that time, let alone considered joining their ranks —but I can remember something of the British lifestyle in the late 1950s and some of the topical issues that arose at that time.

Technologically, British society at the turn of the millennium has advanced by leaps and bounds from the 1950s. Words like 'Internet', 'email', 'word-processing', and 'bar codes' would not even have been understood in 1959. Yuri Gagarin had made the first ever space voyage in 1957, although the human race had to wait just over a decade for the first moon landing of 1969. Even the possession of a television set was not taken for granted: in fact my parents bought our first— second-hand —model in 1959. Yet it was clear that science was advancing, and was showing every promise of delivering the vastly improved lifestyle to which people looked forward.

The principal characteristic of science, it was believed, was verification. My school chemistry teacher taught us that what differentiated science from a 11 our other subjects was that we could 'check things up for ourselves', rather than merely accept facts on authority. Given the emphasis on verifiability, it is not surprising that we find in Twinn's book some attempts to challenge the assertion of Logical Positivism (the philosophical theory advanced principally by A.J.Ayer in Britain, and by the so-called Vienna Circle on the other side of the Channel) that nothing could be meaningfully stated that was not empirically verifiable. By the late 1950s, Logical Positivism had been largely discredited, but there remained an emphasis on the empirical which many religious believers —including Arthur Long and H. Lismer Short in Twinn's volume — perceived as a challenge, since religious beliefs could not be verified in any straight forward way.

The principle of verifiability implied that there were objective truths 'out there' to be verified. Intellectual life in the 1950s was a quest for truth and avoidance of error. Although relativism had enjoyed a limited comeback in the earlier years of the twentieth century with the idealism of philosophers such as F.H. Bradley, idealism had become eclipsed by ,realism', materialism, and are-affirmation of empiricism. Truth was what 'corresponded with reality', as philosophers like J.L. Austin and the early Wittgenstein had suggested.

Outside academic circles, the empirical presented a different sort of challenge. Science appeared to be improving the conditions of human life, but the effects of scientific and technological advance were largely unrecognised in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not until 1972 that the Club of Rome produced its disturbing report entitled Limits to Growth, which highlighted the problems generated by technological advance, rather than its more immediately obvious benefits. The earth was something to be cherished, not dominated and exploited unthinkingly.

The rise of technology affected more than general standards of living: patterns of religious observance changed too. Most obviously, the motor car and the television set enabled former church attendees to devise alternative pursuits for Sundays. Secularisation was beginning to take its toll. Support for the mainstream denominations, which had experienced a slight decline from their 1955 crest (the high point probably being due to the Billy Graham campaign of evangelisation in that year), began to plummet from 1960 onwards, until in Britain today only some 16 percent of the population attend a place of worship once a month or more. Within a short period, an era of relatively full and thriving churches gave way to a period marked by church closures; sacred Christian buildings became warehouses, bingo halls, or places of worship for the immigrant religions which made their way into Britain from the late 1950s onwards.

Within mainstream Christianity, church services tended to be formal and impersonal. The minister always had an air of authority, and the present-day practice of being on first-name terms with him or her would have been unthinkable. The language of the liturgy was deliberately archaic, with its 'thees', 'thous', and 'vouchsafes', and the Bible was usually read in the King James Version. The New English Bible caused a considerable stir when the New Testament edition appeared in 1961,to be followed nine years later by anew translation of the Old Testament.

In Twinn's Essays, C. Gordon Bolam defends 'Theological Liberalism', identifying the conservative theologian Karl Barth as one of his targets. Bolam was writing four years before John A T Robinson (then Bishop of Woolwich) was to publish the controversial best-seller *Honest to God*. Robinson was primarily a New Testament scholar, and, as a piece of theology, this book was not particularly original: it drew heavily on the ideas of Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann. However it was a landmark, not because it said anything inherently new, but because it brought Robinson's questions about the being of God and the nature of the incarnation to the attention of the general public. (Although Bultmann's impact as a biblical scholar is acknowledged by L A Garrard and Fred Kenworthy in Twinn's anthology, Bonhoeffer and Tillich are completely unmentioned.)

Kenworthy's essay, 'Jesus and the Gospel', reflects well the state of the mid-century debate about Jesus. The views of Albert Schweitzer, who once described himself as a Unitarian, are often said to mark a watershed in the debate about the Jesus of history. His monumental work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, translated into English in 1910, was based on the premise, typical of the liberal scholars of his time, that there was a core of historical fact within the New Testament account of Jesus. Jesus, Schweitzer concluded, like many of his time, was a deluded apocalyptist. This rather negative portrayal of Jesus caused other more radical New Testament commentators to question Schweitzer's assumption that the gospels consist of embellished historical material, and indeed whether historicity is important at all. Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus and the Word* was published in its English translation in 1934, but received considerably more attention when Collins re-issued it as a Fontana paperback in 1958. Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, originally delivered as the Shaffer Lectures at Yale University in 1951, was also published in 1958. Bultmann and other existentialist theologians continued to dominate the scene when I began to study Divinity in Glasgow in 1967.

Needless to say, scholarship has moved on from the 1950s and 1960s, and in particular the 1990s have witnessed important contributions not merely from Christian scholars, but from Jews, who arguably have a clearer understanding of the nature of first-century Judaism than their Christian counterparts, the vast majority of whom inevitably see Judaism through their

Christian-tinted spectacles. Kenworthy reflects the debate among Christians: three decades were to elapse before Jewish scholars such as Geza Vermes, Hyam Maccoby, and Michael Hilton made their distinctively Jewish contribution.

A further factor which affected Britain's religious life was the substantial immigration which was just beginning to be evident in the late 1950s. Owing to labour shortages, citizens of (principally) India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were invited to take up jobs in Britain, which until then — with the exception of cosmopolitan London—was largely white. With the new immigrants came their religions, principally Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism. While in previous decades the churches were the local landmarks, most major British cities now have their share of mosques, Hindu temples, Sikh gurudwaras, and Buddhist viharas.

As far as the newer religions were concerned, most of modern Britain's most prominent 'cults' were still unknown in the 1950s. The Unification Church was founded as a small religious community in Korea in 1954, and the marriage between Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han, which was the harbinger of the Blessing ceremonies (the 'mass weddings', as the media call them), did not take place until 1960. The Hare Krishna devotees and the Children of God (now The Family) were the products of the 'hippie' counter-culture of the 1960s. Although L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics* had appeared in 1950, and the Church of Scientology was founded as a self-professed religious organisation in 1954, Scientology did not really come to be known until 1968, when the Callaghan government refused entry to its instructors. Even the Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses were not particularly well known in the late 1950s: the London Mormon Temple was completed and dedicated in 1958, but the numerical strength of the Mormons was only around 10,000: they were to double their membership by 1961, reaching their present peak of 170,000 members in Britain nearly two decades on. In 1959, the Jehovah's Witnesses had an average at any one time of around 41,000 'publishers' (members who undertake door-to-door work), compared with just over 123,000 in 1997.

There have been other social changes too. One important transformation has been the role of women. My mother, who was a school teacher in 1959, received less pay than her male colleagues who were doing the same job, and the 'Situations Vacant' section in the newspapers carried two separate columns, 'Male' and 'Female'. The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act ended these practices, even if it remains the case that women still tend to be excluded from top management jobs and company board rooms. Unitarians have enjoyed a commendable track record in supporting women's rights: the Universalists (now, sadly, extinct in Britain) and the Unitarians were the first two denominations world-wide to ordain women, and Unitarians campaigned vigorously for women's suffrage in the early parts of the twentieth century, both in Britain and in the USA. It is disappointing that Twinn's Essays in *Unitarian Theology* is an all-male collection, with no contribution whatsoever from any woman.

The present collection aims to present a number of Unitarian positions —'perspectives'— relating to several of these issues that I have outlined. There are other issues that could have been considered. 'Science and religion' is an obvious omission, but perhaps it can be justified on the grounds that Unitarians have said so much on this theme in the past. Creation spirituality and the impact of ecology on religious thinking are not included, and it was not possible to commission an essay relating to 'liberation theology' and issues of human justice, poverty and oppression. In its discussions the Publications Panel has mooted the idea of a subsequent collection dealing with societal themes, so we may yet see some Unitarian perspectives on these topics.

In this volume, **Kay Millard** examines the way in which religion has changed in recent times, discussing how 'implicit religion' has come to supersede the formally organized 'explicit religion' which prevailed until the early 1960s.

Peter Hawkins takes up the theme of the wider changes in the European intellectual climate, and their impact on religion. 'Post-modernism' is a frequently heard by-word in present-day intellectual circles, but what does the term mean? Using a lively dialogue format, Hawkins provides a useful introduction to the theme.

Vernon Marshall provides an important summary of Unitarian involvement in the study of other faiths and in inter-faith relationships — a history of which Unitarians can be justly proud. Not only is Britain now a `plural society' rather than an exclusively Christian country: as British Unitarians become increasingly familiar with the ideas and practices of faiths other than Christianity, the erstwhile Christian identity of British Unitarians requires serious consideration. Having been denied even observer status in the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, Unitarians are now forced to consider whether they are a Christian or a multi-faith denomination.

The essay by **Ann Peart** traces the history of women's roles within the Unitarian movement, and their campaigns to gain recognition and equal status with men. Names like Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Crook, Frances Power Cobbe, Anna Swanwick, Marian Evans (alias George Eliot), Harriet Martineau, and Harriet Taylor Mill - to name but a few - will no doubt already be familiar to many readers. Peart assesses their contribution, and also demonstrates how organisations within the denomination, such as the Women's League, have enabled women to assume important positions in the denomination with confidence and efficiency.

The contribution by **Margaret Wilkins** makes some passing reference to Jesus' attitude towards women, but the main aim of this essay is to update the Jesus debate, drawing on, but going beyond, Unitarian writers such as Wigmore-Beddoes (1975). 'Unitarian Perspectives on Jesus' provides a useful summary of the Jesus debate, and raises important issues about the way in which present-day Unitarians might regard the status and role of Jesus in their religious thinking.

My own essay on 'Unitarians, New Religions and the New Age' deliberately focuses on a theme that is not widely discussed in Unitarian circles. There is concern about the issue in society more widely, however, and I hope that the essay will be of interest in raising questions about Unitarians' limits to tolerance and also about new forms of spirituality that mayor may not be welcomed within the denomination.

Finally, the essay by **Frank Walker** on The Sea of Faith explores the way in which that movement, centred on the ideas of Don Cupitt and a few other radical mainstream Christian thinkers, calls for a 're-vision' and 're-envisioning of religious faith'. Is it 'chaotic confusion' or 'religious ferment'? In true Unitarian fashion, readers are left to provide their own answer!

A couple of final remarks are perhaps appropriate. The first relates to women's contribution to this volume. Before feminist readers write in to point out that male contributors slightly outnumber females, I think it is worth pointing out that the Lindsey Press's original plan was to invite a total of six women writers and four men. All three contributors who had to drop out were women, which is no doubt a testimony to the wide variety of demands on women's time in present-day society. It is also worth mentioning that the male–female balance in this volume was not achieved through any deliberate policy of having a quota of women writers: all who have contributed were asked because the Lindsey Press's publications panel believed them to be the most suitable for the task, regardless of gender.

My second observation is — perhaps unnecessarily — a disclaimer. The 'perspectives' that are offered in this volume are the perspectives of individual Unitarians, not any official Unitarian perspective on any of the topics. Since Unitarianism seeks to promote the three key principles of 'freedom, reason, and tolerance', each Unitarian is encouraged to reach his or her own conclusions, using reason as a guide to questions of truth, and conscience as a guide in matters of behaviour. The seven essays in this volume are offered for consideration, not as authoritative answers to difficult questions which do not admit of certainties. If there is not complete unanimity among the various contributors, then this is surely a merit rather than a deficiency of the book.

Similar observations apply to the style of writing. I must confess that when I first saw Peter Hawkins' piece on post-modernism my expectations of a much more conventional straight forward essay were confounded. My first thought was that, as editor, I had given contributors insufficient guidance about house style and presentation. However, as I read further, I saw the merit of exploring in a lively dialogue form a theme that might otherwise have turned out to be abstruse and incomprehensible, and it is an important characteristic of post-modernists to devise novel forms of expression. Readers will find considerable variation in approach in the various chapters: while some authors emphasise the history of particular issues, others focus on current themes. Some are anecdotal, while others seem more at home with abstractions. I hope this serves to underline the variety of perspectives that seven Unitarians bring to bear on their subject matter, and that this variety will assist readers to attain their own perspective on the subjects that this volume explores.

Implicit Religion - The Spirituality of the Secular

Kay Millard

'When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England!' (Henry Fielding)

We have come a long way from the eighteenth-century parson in Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. He was, of course, something of a satirical figure in his own time; but even in the early years of the twentieth century there were debates about whether Buddhism was truly a religion, because it did not require a belief in a supreme being. Yet there are times when I envy Parson Thwackum, because at least his definition of religion had the merit of being easy to follow. When we have dismissed him as a man who could not see beyond his port-reddened nose, and wondered at those who could query whether Buddhism was fit to be included in the comparative canon, we are still left with the question of what exactly religion is. It is something of a comfort to learn that its meaning has been a matter of debate since at least the days of Cicero; however, I am more concerned with what it means today.

It is clear from a glance at works on religion that the definition of the subject has progressively widened over the past few generations. A study of the ground-breaking book *Comparative Religion* by the Unitarian scholar J. Estlin Carpenter (1913) (which does include Buddhism and other non-monotheistic religions) and, say, Bocock and Thomson's *Religion and Ideology* (1985) indicates that not only has the subject of religion become much more widely inclusive during the course of the twentieth century, but also the idea that any religion must be studied from its own standpoints, and on its own terms, has taken firm root. This is partly attributable to the multiplication of alternative cultural influences in human education and experience that has taken place in the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War (Wolffe, 1994). It is also partly attributable to the process of secularization; more ideologies look religious from an atheistic standpoint than from a traditional Christian one. For whatever reason, however, any definition of religion that may be deemed appropriate in contemporary society (that is, in postindustrial Western society) will have to be one that allows for a variety of religious expression and enables understanding of the underlying bases of very diverse religions and philosophies.

Seeking such a definition is a difficult task, because the essence of religion is, by its nature, impossible to pin down. Not surprisingly there are many possible definitions available to contemporary students of religion. For the present purpose, religion is considered to be concerned with the very broad area of the essential spiritual life of humankind, and its expression.

At the linguistic heart of the word 'religion' is the idea of connectedness. Durkheim (1915) suggested that this connectedness could be expressed in terms of a 'church', though not in the sense of a building set aside for religious purposes, but in the sense of a community of believers who hold certain tenets and rituals in common. This understanding of religion is inherent in sociological studies. However, to the religionist, rather than the sociologist, connectedness means more: it can also refer to the individual person and his/her connection with that which is transcendent and universal; or to a personal connection to a particular religious tradition. These three aspects of connectedness are not mutually exclusive. Religion as we experience it, however, is much more than a linguistic description. It usually includes a sense of sacredness, and produces an effect on our ethical behaviour, as Durkheim also showed.

Religion for many people is something that gives meaning to their existence. Meaning, however, is not the same as explanation. Meaning may well include explanations, which then become doctrines; but it may also include non-linguistic factors, such as a sense of awe and reverence, an awareness of the numinous, as Otto (1923) put it. Nor does meaning exclude the possibility of paradox; on the contrary, with its focus on the inexplicable, religion inevitably does include paradox.

Thus, although the definition of religion may continue to broaden, it should never become so broad as to become meaningless. Religion is about those aspects of our lives that are of overwhelming importance to us, those things that are concerned with something other, something beyond the everyday, physical world. Here all language, and all linguistic definitions, can be merely analogous.

In this context, religion may be a recognised belief system with a developed doctrine. Explicit religions, each with a structured (if debatable) theology, or path to enlightenment, and publicly declared adherents, are the main subject of study for religionists, and the secular is assumed to lie outside religion. But a broad definition of religion allows that in addition to the explicit religions, with their formal worship, ritual, doctrine, and ethics, there maybe an implicit religion of an individual ore secular community.

In psychological terms, one could describe implicit and explicit religions as respectively sub-conscious and conscious. However, this analogy is not strictly correct, since much implicit religion is present in an individual's consciousness. The implicit and explicit do overlap, as do subconscious and conscious mental processes; just as religious adherents take their religious beliefs and ethics into their secular lives, so individuals carry their own implicitly religious commitments into acts of worship in the churches to which they belong. Thus implicit religion is present with and in explicit religion. But it is also present outside and without explicit religion. Implicit religion is expressed in public behaviour, though in ways that might not immediately appear religious to an observer; and in the innate spirituality of individuals who adhere to no explicit religion. In short, it has become possible to perceive religion where previously only 'non-belief' was assumed.

An example of this is shown by the revision of long-held assumptions about historical figures. A case in point is the eighteenth-century political thinker Tom Paine. In his own time Paine was regarded as an atheist, and indeed he had much to say in vehement opposition to the Christian Church. However, a recent study of his writings (Fruchtman, 1993) indicates that he accorded to Nature the status of a religion, and his writings have been reinterpreted in the light of that.

It is reasonable to ask on what authority such revisions are being made, and here it is necessary to trace the path of religious thinking that has brought us to the present widely inclusive position. Among the theologians who have made crucial contributions to it was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who identified the essence of religion as a feeling of absolute dependence, without defining the object towards which it was directed. Although Schleiermacher was a devoted churchman, his theology laid the foundations for a radical re-evaluation of the nature of religion. It is possible to name a number of others, but in our own century perhaps the two who have made the most important contribution in this field are Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and Paul Tillich (1896-1965). Teilhard's proposition is of a focus towards which all spirituality in matter ultimately tends, even in an increasingly complex universe. This finds echoes in Tillich's idea of ultimate concern'. Tillich also sought a 'religion of culture' that would speak to those outside the Church, and a common ground of being.

In addition to such theologies, the works of Mircea Eliade, which include many passages on the phenomenology of religion, have shown that religion can be inferred from its public manifestations. (For an overview of this Unitarian thinker's very wide-ranging work on religion, see Altizer, 1976.)

All these separate, though compatible, strands of religious thought are crucial to an understanding of implicit religion.

Theologians and religionists are not the only people to make a contribution to an understanding of religion. The growth of other disciplines over the past century has not only produced a wealth of further knowledge about the nature of existence, but has also developed a rigorous research methodology that is now being applied to religious studies. Specifically, psychology, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and the various physical sciences have all played key roles.

An example of the importance of this inter-disciplinary approach is the work of Sir Alister Hardy. A zoologist at the top of his chosen scientific profession, Hardy turned to a study of religious experience and founded the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford in 1969. This pioneering work endeavoured to investigate the truth of the ideas of Estlin Carpenter in the UK and William James in the USA regarding the universality of spiritual experience in human life. As we shall see, implicit religion is much concerned with the experience of the individual. Hardy's work showed not only that spiritual experiences were reported by a significant number and a wide variety of people, but that there were suitable research methodologies for studying this phenomenon. In spite of the fact that Hardy's method has been criticised, others have followed up his original research, and have thus achieved for the innate world of human spirituality what Max Weber had achieved for the external manifestations of it in his 1922 study of the role of religion in society. (It should be noted, however, that implicit religion does not rely for its propositions on the kinds of experience of the numinous studied by Hardy, though it may well include them.)

The possibility of studying religion among the growing section of the population who claimed no adherence to an explicit religion was therefore available by the 1970s. Ideas about the nature of religion were sufficiently developed, and so were methodologies. The question remained whether such studies could produce any meaningful results. For a long time, the secular had been effectively defined as that which lay outside the religious sphere. This had not been so in earlier periods of human history, when religion pervaded every aspect of life. But the growth of industrialization in the West, and the fragmentation of knowledge into discrete fields of study, had progressively encouraged the post-Reformation dichotomy of the religious and the secular.

But what if secularization itself represented not so much a *disappearance* of religion as a *transformation* of religion? If that could be the case, implicit religion might well be — and increasingly become—as important in contemporary culture as the explicit forms of religion have been in the past. Such a possibility demands, at the very least, the response of serious investigation.

The basis of implicit religion

'What? When I say, "Nicole, bring me my slippers and give me my nightcap", that's prose?'
'Yes, sir.'
'Gracious me! I've been talking prose for the last forty years and have never known it.'
(Molibre: Le Bourgeois gentilhomme)

The Network for the Study of Implicit Religion was founded in the 1970s by the Revd. Dr. Edward Bailey, Rector of Winterbourne and a Canon of Bristol Cathedral. Perhaps significantly, the network has from the first been both international and multi-disciplinary. After a generation's research work, a Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality has been established at the Tottenham campus of Middlesex University.

Bailey's original doctoral research (now reported in Bailey, 1997) was directed towards a survey of a geographical community (a large parish); involvement in a secular place of social interaction (a public house); and interviews with individuals. It was concerned with people's commitments. It sought intensive concerns with extensive effects. It examined how the focus of human commitment produced integration of being.

The studies revealed' an all-but-ineffable apprehension and valuation of the Self'. They also revealed contexts in which Selves can connect with other Selves and yet remain intact, What is this 'Self'? It is best understood in the sense that Jung used it, that is, it is the part of the human psyche that most deeply expresses the individual and drives other elements of the psyche towards integration. It is not the same as 'God', yet in bringing the individual to its supreme wholeness, it can be analogous to what theologians would call the work of God.

An extension of the commitment to the Self is a respect for other Selves. If one's Self is 'sacred', then all other Selves are sacred. Hence there is an insistence on the right of everyone to make up his or her own mind. Thus the commitment to Self is not self-interested. The idealization of the Self becomes a means of breaking down the 'me—you' duality. In addition to behaving with respect for other Selves, it becomes possible to transcend Self in empathy with others. A commitment to the Self, one's own and others, is therefore a two-way 'integrating focus' of Self-to-Other-Selves and Other-Selves-to-Self. The ethical result of the commitment of implicit religion is therefore compassion.

Bailey's studies added a new element to observed religion: commitment to the Self. This can be placed alongside two observations from studies of religion in the early twentieth century The first, drawn from the work of Durkheim, Evans-Pritchard, and others, on the social anthropology of small-scale societies, may be described as 'a sense of the sacred'. The second, derived from the work of Rudolf Otto and referring to the great historical religions, may be described as 'an encounter with the holy'. Then, in the post-industrial world, comes Bailey's commitment to the Self. This suggests that the integrating focus of religion has changed. In fact, these foci are not mutually exclusive, and it would be more true to say that the integrating focus has been extended, with an accompanying shift of emphasis. It is still the case that human religious experience is concerned with an indefinable sense of the sacred, arising from one's immediate surroundings; in a more intellectual religious context, that same sense maybe directed towards encountering the individual's idea of the holy. It is perhaps paradoxically in the wider sphere of globalization that the commitment to the Self is foremost. This last is a feature of implicit religion, but as an essential part of an individual's experience it is also carried by the individual into her or his explicit religion. The Religion, as an organized community with doctrinal commitments, may deny it (consciously or unconsciously), or struggle to adjust to incorporate it. It is important to remember that implicit religion is not simply a key to understanding the secular world in a religious context. It is also a means of understanding the common religious sub-structure existing in every philosophy of life that is recognized as religion.

Unlike explicit religion, implicit religion is not adopted as a religion by a group of adherents. It is not taught; its doctrines are undeveloped. It derives very much from life experience. Thus, while it may have much in common with Humanism, it is also dissimilar. It does not place at its heart the confidence in the power of intellectual and cultural achievement, as did post-Renaissance Religious Humanism, because it is innate and instinctive, rather than reasoned. Nor is implicit religion necessarily a denial of a supreme being; it can co-exist quite happily with that belief. Nor does it place much value on institutions to develop the Self; the wellsprings of implicit religion are the individual, the individual in community, and the present time (which bears within it the individual's past experience). The most analogous study is depth psychology, rather than Religious Humanism, wherein the human psyche becomes the field of exploration and yields images and connections that have religious parallels. The interior nature of implicit religion, the on-going personal spirituality that it represents, is closely related to kindred psychological phenomena observed by Jung and others. The behaviour resulting from personal spirituality is its widespread outward manifestation (its phenomenology).

The affirmation of implicit religion is the 'valuing of values'. This idealizing of an idea is not unexpected; ever since Robert Bellah pointed out in 1968 that, as a society secularizes, the sacred is found increasingly in ideas rather than objects, many studies have confirmed his proposition. The open-endedness of the affirmation of implicit religion means that the values themselves are often enumerated only vaguely. However, they are of necessity values that protect the sacred Self, and if possible move it towards Self-fulfilment, which maybe interpreted as the 'salvation' of the Self. It is interesting to note that feelings of guilt arise from a failure to be one's best Self, particularly in relation to other Selves (Millard, 1995). Values may change as the Self changes, or as the relationships in which the Self engages change, but tradition plays some part in the adoption of values too—there is a sense that some at least are ultimate, however much they, and indeed implicit religion itself, may be, as Clifford Geertz pointed out, culturally determined.

It has not been possible in the space available to give more than a brief introduction to the basis of implicit religion, nor to do justice to the work of Bailey and others. However, it should now be clear that there is much within implicit religion that can deepen our understanding of the 'secular' world. So far we have been concerned with the immanent nature of implicit religion; but what of the transcendent? For although implicit religion begins in the individual, it does not end there. Its outward expressions are widespread, and transcend both the individual and the everyday.

Transcendent elements of implicit religion

After the seas are all cross'd (as already cross'd already cross'd),
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, thegeologist, the ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.
(Walt Whitman)

There is a mystery acknowledged in implicit religion: the mystery of what Life is. We can see when life as a biological state is present, and when it is absent; but the transition between the two states is a mystery. Implicit religion, like any other, can only go so far in explanation of the mystery. There is a point where we can go no further into it by means of intellectual knowledge. The evidence of poetry, however, suggests that many people explore this area of mystery by creative writing and the use of poetic metaphor. (It would also be interesting to have a study of painting and music in similar vein, but to my knowledge this has not been attempted yet.)

Many poems — both published and unpublished — use religious language and imagery. This should not be surprise us, given that the human mind, as Jung showed us, is full of religious symbolism (Jung, 1964). Nor, perhaps, is it surprising that images from the world of nature are used to express joy, given the long-established genre of Romantic poetry and the scriptural tradition of apprehending God in creation.

Within implicit religion, however, poetry appears to have taken on a secular prophetic voice. 'Those whom the ancient Israelites called prophets, the equally ancient Greeks called poets. The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly' (Brueggemann, 1989). It is noteworthy too that contemporary poetry is value-laden, the values being those prophetic favourites, justice and peace. There are two reasons for poetry, rather than prose, filling this role: first, poetry allows for the use of imagery where direct description fails; and, second, poetry focuses with great intensity, It may be added that poetry is heard or read at a deeper mental level than prose. It is also possible to 'speculate' in a poem more easily than in prose, because the latter imposes a more rational regime on the writer. At its best, poetry touches the universal, the common ground of being; it is a great connector.

Among the many subjects explored in poetry is the question of life after death. This is not nowadays regarded as an essential element of even explicit religions (Walter's research, published in 1996, places its disappearance from the explicit consciousness as no later than the 1960s), but it is still apparently a concern for many people. There is no certainty, and yet for many there is an implicit commitment to the idea of some kind of survival, whether it is in terms of rejoining the stream of 'Life', continuing in human memories or through the legacy of their genes, through reincarnation, or in a more traditional 'heavenly realm'.

There is also evidence —not only from poetry, but also from studies in the press and on television —that the sacred mystery of Life is increasingly acknowledged as belonging to all forms of life, not only the human. Animals are particularly included, though plants and rocks are also seen as part of a living web of connectedness. The sacred mystery of Life therefore also serves as an integrating focus of implicit religion, alongside the sense of Self. The inclusion of other forms of life besides humankind within the sacred sphere means that the ethical concern for other Selves (that is, the main feature of the morality of Implicit Religion) is extended to them in addition to human beings.

If Life is a mystery, it also holds a paradox. Life is change, and many people fear change (as they ultimately fear the change of death, not only their own deaths but universal death). Yet change in an ethically acceptable direction is the only means of progress, and the ultimate defeat of death can be achieved only by a transformation of the Self into something other. There is therefore a difficult balance between hope and fear, in which sometimes one and sometimes the other is uppermost. In this context the need for a spirituality offering paths towards transcending fear and leading to a spiritual transformation could account (at least in part) for the current growth of interest in various forms and practices of Buddhism in both Europe and America, and the expansion of those branches of Christianity that place emphasis on salvation.

Another paradox concerns the nature of the human Self. While the human Self is sacralized, it is nevertheless recognised that human beings are capable of terrible cruelty. Bafflement in the face of evil is another feature of implicit religion (Millard, 1995). While most people still hope for the ultimate triumph of good, there is an area of human behaviour that cannot be explained, except in terms of innate evil. Attempts to explain callous cruelty, which is the negation of respect for another sacred Self, are usually made in psychological and/or sociological terms in the industrial or post-industrial culture of the West. Where those concepts fail to explain, the mystery of evil is left an open question.

If the question of evil cannot be explained, however, it can be answered in terms of a response. Here the philosophy of the 'human family' that derives from the notion of the interrelationship of individual Selves becomes a motivating force for action. Such action takes many forms and has a tendency to be highly individualistic, depending on both the nature of the problem and the capability of the individual to act. Where a large-scale problem is concerned (for example, famine), the aggregation of individual responses forms a 'community of response', even though the members of the community so formed are unknown to each other. Such responses transcend not only the boundaries of personal knowledge, but also the boundaries of race and explicit religion. This is another aspect of the universalism revealed through the medium of poetry. It should not be confused with explicit doctrines of universalism (that is, that there is one Creator God, and that Jesus is a universal Saviour), or the belief that all people hold within them the potential for salvation, though it may well underlie those doctrines. Implicit universalism is based on the connectedness of Selves, not on salvation, unless the concept of salvation is understood solely in terms of enabling the Self to fulfil its best potential in this world.

Another aspect of mystery in implicit religion is the role of prayer. Prayers are often uttered by people who would not subscribe to the idea that there is any One to answer them with divine intervention. In these circumstances prayer is not concerned with petition, but with the idea of deepening and sustaining both one's Self and, transcendentally, other Selves. It is not unusual for prayers to be offered for the sustenance of those unknown to the petitioner (for example, prayers for those who work for peace in various parts of the world, such as Northern Ireland or Rwanda). Exactly how this is expected to work as a mechanism is not and cannot be explained, but commitment to the efficacy of such belief is widespread.

If Life is a mystery, that does not mean — according to another value of implicit religion — that human beings have no part to play in determining the quality of life to be lived. On the contrary, the impairment or even destruction of life's quality is regarded as offending against the potential fulfilment of the best Self. This commitment to the quality of life is entirely consistent with the underlying commitment to the human Self, and may determine the ethical behaviour resulting from that religious impulse, though it can present the human being with the acute dilemma of choosing between the preservation of (sacred) Life and taking a chance on the survival of the Self through the transformation of death.

Community expressions of implicit religion

'There is no system. It is only a relationship.'
(Jan Wood)

Some reference has already been made to the ability of the Self to transcend individuality in an aggregated response to suffering. A striking example of this was the range of diverse but essentially similar responses of the general public to the death in 1997 of Diana, Princess of Wales. The placing of flowers at appropriate locations, a practice becoming common wherever there has been violent death even when the victim is a stranger, is one outward manifestation of the need to express grief. It is too early, perhaps, to evaluate with any objectivity the phenomenon of the public mourning for Princess Diana, revealing as it did the need for an iconic image and the desire to visit a place of pilgrimage, but there can be no doubt of the intensity of feeling displayed, or its extensive effects.

Monarchy has always been invested with a religious dimension, and in addition it has become a focus of national integration (as distinct from nationalism). Ina similar way, a Mayor may be a focus for local community integration. Office-holders are attended with ceremony and ritual, and embody the public desire to connect with the past tradition of their locality, be it nation or city. Both mayors and monarchs are expected to be above politics, embodying the value-laden public ideal of service without reward and the transcendence of sectional interest.

The name given to such implicit religion made public is 'civil religion'. One of the prime examples of civil religion in Britain is the annual observance of Remembrance Sunday. The symbol of the poppy has become instantly recognizable and triggers many feelings, including honour for those who sacrificed their lives for national integrity, a wish for peace, and grief for the many victims of war, (The grief may include sorrow for more general destruction and despoliation.) These are elements of implicit religion made publicly real. The public reality is expressed in the ceremonial —the parades, the standards, the music, the prayers, and the reverential silence. Attended by substantial sections of secular society, the ceremonial has its own rituals: gathering at a special place, usually a war memorial; the laying of wreaths by civic leaders; a progression along specific routes; and the special timing of a climax of remembrance. It is precisely this special timing of the ceremonial that enables the participants to transcend the present and connect with historical events in which they played no personal part. This may explain the current popular demand for the re-introduction of the two-minute silence at 11 am on 11 November each year, as well as on Remembrance Sunday.

Many societies have their own expressions of civil religion, including the USA with its ceremonializing of democracy at Federal, State, and local levels, and its Veterans' Day and Thanksgiving Day. Similar in some outward features, but very different in underlying ideology from both the UK and the USA, is the civil religion of a totalitarian state. The ideologies of both Marxism and Fascism express a civil religion that glorifies the transcendent demands of society over the individual. This is not inconsistent with an underlying commitment to the fulfilment of the Self, since both Fascism and Marxism propound the idea that the Self is fulfilled by the collective society — a 'super Self'. Thus the dangers of an implicit religion that may be turned towards shadow ideologies become apparent. However, political factors also need to be taken into account by students of civil religion, particularly the cultural tradition of freedom and consent (or its lack). Just as politics reflects the underlying mythological paradigm of the political society, thus making any political philosophy unique to its civilisation, so also is civil religion affected by beliefs regarding the methodologies of the political life of the community.

In contrast to such organised and repeated expressions of civil religion, one of the most notable features of the public expression of implicit religion is the spontaneous formation of human groups. These flourish as long as there is a need for them, which maybe for the short or the long term. An example of the former would be a self-help bereavement support group, while an example of the latter would be the national organization, Cruse. Other examples area' one-off' appeal for the relief of the victims of earthquake, and the establishment of relief organizations such as Oxfam, Water Aid, and so on. Both short- and long-term communities of caring are unlimited in terms of geographical location, racial origin, or membership requirements. They do not, therefore, represent the traditional communities of neighbourhood, nationality, religious denomination, or other affiliation. On the contrary, there appears to be a growing relegation of such traditional communities to their appropriate 'functional' role, while those aspects of human life that require interactions which go beyond everyday needs are recognised as needing some community that is focused in a special way.

An important element of human life that integrates the functional and spiritual aspects of the human is education. On the one hand it is necessary for all of us to acquire cognitive and practical skills in order to cope with the various requirements of everyday living. At the same time, there is a clearly expressed desire among the population for something more, something that develops the Self. This is shown by the formation of all kinds of educational groups, both within and outside the formal education system. It is also shown in the pursuit of creative (or re-creative) 'hobbies' that develop individual gifts, and in the experiential approach to cognitive development. It is not so much that there is a duality in education; rather there is a need to develop an individual in the appropriate way for his or her needs and desires at each stage of life, and hence a requirement for an eclectic but long-term approach to education, if the Self is to be fulfilled.

Much education in a highly individuated culture is self-education, which may at its deepest level become education of the Self. An example of such self-education is the contemporary quest for myths of origin. The secular sphere offers little in the way of myths of origin, and, as John Yungblut (1992) has pointed out, we need to seek them for ourselves. In the past generation in England there has been an explosion of interest in the Arthurian legends, which is perhaps evidence for such a search at a racial level. This has been paralleled in Wales by a rediscovery of Celtic myth, and in Scotland by an increased interest in early Scottish history; both Wales and Scotland have, at the same time, experienced a resurgence of the idea of nationhood. At the family level, an increased interest in genealogy can be interpreted as a quest for origins.

However, in spite of these public examples, the main focus of implicit religion lies in and with the individual, in his or her relational context. The Self asks: who am I? It is for each individual to seek a myth which satisfies that Self.

A residue or a reservoir?

It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves, There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigour of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. (Henry David Thoreau)

Many questions about implicit religion remain. Any commitment to the human Self has to take account of why some people behave in ways that apparently ignore that integrating focus, and are deliberately destructive. Here it has to be borne in mind that implicit religion deals with the individual. Its observed phenomena may deal with the individual in the aggregate, but that does not mean there is an average implicitly religious human being. The aggregate contains myriad varieties, whose Self-expression sometimes, perhaps often, coincides with the expressions of other Selves. Some of those Selves maybe damaged, immature, or even angry that the wholeness they subconsciously seek is apparently beyond them.

Yet just as sociology, psychology, and anthropology have had a profound impact on our understanding of religion, so might a study of religion, implicit as well as explicit, contribute to our understanding of the society in which we live, the human psyche, and the behaviour of humankind. The more we learn from any field of study, the more we will understand. Nevertheless, we cannot explain everything, for to do so would be to reduce to nothing the realm of religion, with its tremendous and fascinating mysteries. It is neither possible nor desirable to explain everything, lest we explain it away. What studies of implicit religion can, and should, do is to explore the spirituality of the secular, and ensure that it is recognized, so that it can be taken into account in any approach to life, whether that approach be (for example) political, medical, educational, or organizational.

This is a very large concept which, if it gained only partial currency, would result in a transformation of the world in which we live. To justify such a concept, implicit religion would have to be studied much further, its evidence assembled and widely published, and its propositions clarified. Above all, it would have to answer the question of its critics,who ask whether it is the residue of a more explicitly religious past rather than a new growth that will develop in the future.

It has to be admitted that much evidence shows a positive inclination towards Christianity (though not Christ as an aspect of God, and not the Christian Church) (Bailey, 1997). Some elements of implicit religion may therefore be residual, though not all, and studies of implicit religion do not deny this possibility. If it is the case that elements of implicit religion are residual, it maybe expected to change in this respect over time. On the other hand, the teachings of Christianity may embody those values that individuals have found from experience to be good, in which case implicit religion will retain its Christian attributes. More research needs to be done, over an extended period, before there canbe certainty one way or the other.

The statement that implicit religion is not wholly residual is supported by the observable fact that explicit religions have had to try to adapt —sometimes with considerable difficulty and a tortuous re-interpretation of doctrines — to an approach that develops the Self. There are also spontaneous grass-roots movements, such as the Green Movement, that feature transcendence, which have surprised those churches which regard religion as their own private preserve. This may be a temporary phenomenon, but if the nature of humankind is among other things essentially spiritual, as Alister Hardy proposed, it will last, and may well flourish in the right cultural environment.

Any development of implicit religion, however, will of necessity be gradual. The experiential nature of implicit religion will require a lifetime of spiritual learning for each generation. Perhaps in years to come, implicit religion will be recognized not so much as the spirituality of the secular, but as the unconventional wisdom of a mature human race.

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Questions for discussion

1.What life experiences have caused you to think about the meaning of life?
2. How does Unitarianism encourage the development of the individual Self?
3. What have you found in secular literature that strikes you as spiritual?
4. Unitarians value reason. In the light of studies of implicit religion, is reason enough?

The author

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Post-modernism and Religion

Peter Hawkins

Dear Reader

Welcome. I do not know who you are or how you got here. In fact I do not really know how I got here. It sort of started when I received a letter from our Editor, saying would I write a chapter for a book on modern Unitarian thought, about 'Post-modernism and religion'.

I have no idea why he picked on me. I am not a philosopher or a theologian. I don't even consider myself a 'post-modernist'. And what an impossible subject! How can you write about post-modernism, when to do so would require a meta-perspective from which to view the field? This is impossible, for post-modernism denies the reality of meta-narratives, and anyway we are still immersed in its emerging and unfolding complexity, and no overall shape can possibly be discerned.

I was just about to write a polite letter declining this invitation from the Editor when I remembered that I was just about to go on holiday sailing with members of the 'Western Academy' — a joke name for the men's group to which I have belonged for over 12 years, to whom and up on whom I will dedicate and inflict this chapter — if ever finish it. Now this group contains a leading Zen Buddhist teacher, a Jungian analyst, a Gestalt writer and psychologist, and a leading writer about modern research methodology, epistemology, and post-modern paradigms. If any group could help me grapple with post-modernism and religion, this had to be the one.

I began to think that perhaps this strange task that had dropped through my letter-box would catalyse some rich dialogue within the group. I also thought it might help me to dialogue with myself and gain greater understanding of my own implicit beliefs and values. Now that I am actually writing, I also hope it will catalyse some useful dialogue with you, the reader, although dialogue through written publication is always a somewhat strange conversation.

But I have already reached the second page, and I have not yet stopped to ask about you, Why have you arrived here? What hope, interest, or curiosity has brought you here? What questions do you have about postmodernism, religion, and the relationship between the two? I would encourage you to stop, before you get swept away from your own starting point, and write down where you are starting from and what your questions are.

Having embarked, the next problem I face is one of form. Postmodernism has been most to the fore in the fields of art, architecture, and literature, where form is critical. You cannot be post-modern and write in a traditional, formal form. So what form? At this point I happened across the following quotation:

By *heterotopia*, Foucault means the coexistence in 'an impossible space' of a 'large number of fragmentary possible worlds' ... incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other. (Harvey, 1990, p48)

So I plan to write a heterotopia in three parts: Part One to explore the complex area of post-modernism; Part Two to describe the resurrection, out of the deconstructionist rubble, of an ecological reconstructive postmodernism and the new theology that is emerging from it; Part Three to present the challenges that this new theology poses for the Unitarian movement, as it struggles to transform itself into a movement fit for the twenty-first century.

Now in Part One I am going to use the form of metalogues that l learned from Gregory Bateson, one of the seminal thinkers of the twentieth century, who wrote metalogues between his daughter and himself. I took writing metalogues when my first child used to ask really interesting questions, like: 'Why are we not born knowing everything? Then we would not have to go to school. 'l have continued these metalogues, partly as a way of talking to myself and partly as a spiritual practice. For I believe that spiritual practice needs to be in relationship, and in a relationship that goes beyond debate, to dialogue, and beyond dialogue to trialogue (of which more later... in Part Three if you can not wait). At times other voices and texts interrupt the dialogue, to guard against solipsism. These I have put in italics.

This dialogue is between Father and Son. I am neither of these, or perhaps both (hence the male gender appellation). I am clearly also the writer who runs between them, orchestrating the dialogue. Now you may think or guess that I am playing at Trinity, which is a dangerous and presumptuous thing to be doing in a Unitarian book. But then welcome to post-modernism!

Part One: an exploration of post-modernism

Son: What is post-modernism?

Father: There is no such thing as post-modernism. For to be post-modern is to not believe in 'isms'. And if there is an 'ism', then there have to be many 'isms', for post-modern approaches embrace plurality and avoid the scholastic addiction to grand synthesis and meta-theory.

Son: So how can you talk about it, or write about it?

Father: I am not sure that you can.

Son: Perhaps it is something you have to look through, a sort of lens.

Father: Or something you have to be — a place of looking from.

Son: But you told me that there was no fixity in post-modernism, so it cannot be a place.

Father: Now that is a very good point. Perhaps it is a moving place — or a plaice that swims in the contextual sea.

Son: Is that a post-modern joke? If so, it is no better than your old ones. Can you at least tell me what a definition would be?

Father: I am not sure if there are any definitions or experts in the traditional sense. Some self-styled post-modernists still try and act like experts, which is really quite useful when you are lost. Charles Jencks, the architect and thinker, wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* on 'The origins of "postmodernism... (quoted in Appignanesi and Garratt, 1995, p3) as follows:

'Posteriority'... really develops in the 1970s, in architecture and literature, two centres of the postmodern debate ... 'Reconstructive postmodernism' comes to the fore after the French post-structuralists (Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard) became accepted in the United States in the late 1970s, and now half the academic world believes postmodernism is confined to negative dialectics and deconstruction. But in the 1980s a series of new, creative movements occurred, variously called 'constructive', 'ecological', 'grounded', and 'restructive' post-modernism,...

I should add that one of the great strengths of the word, and the concept ... is that it is carefully suggestive about our having gone beyond the worldview of modernism—which is clearly inadequate —without specifying where we are going. ... But since 'Modernism' was coined apparently in the third century, perhaps its first use was then.

Son: So were the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed modern or postmodern?

Father: Possibly pre-modern, but we will come to that. You see, the more I have studied post-modern writings and writings about post-modern writings, and writings about those writings, the more I believe, as someone who was trained in History, that you cannot easily create periods of modernism and post-modernism. For modernism is still the dominant world-view of our times, and strands of post-modernity certainly go back a long way.

Son: So they are basically two different world-views?

Father: Yes, in away; but also there is a particular form of post-modernism that is part of the particular struggle of our times. At first I thought that postmodernism was the struggle with the shadow side and negative consequences of the Enlightenment. I thought that modernism began with the early Enlightenment thinkers — Galileo, Descartes, and Bacon— and continued through the science of Newton and the philosophy of Locke, and then reached its culmination in the application of the scientific world-view to the understanding of humans themselves, in Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

Son: But these are all great scientific thinkers who liberated us from the superstitions of the mediaeval age.

Father: Yes, but at what price?
The moral crisis of our time is a crisis of Enlightenment thought. For while the latter may

indeed have allowed man to emancipate himself from community and tradition of the Middle Ages in which his individual freedom was submerged, the Enlightenment affirmation of self without God in the end negated itself because reason, a means, was left, in the absence of God's truth, without any spiritual or moral goal.... The post-modern theological project is to reaffirm God's truth without abandoning the powers of reason.
(Harvey, 1990,p41)

Son: But that is precisely what the Unitarians have been struggling with for many years: how to have the best of both worlds; to have a scientific rational belief in parallel with a theological deism.

Father: Yes, despite all of Martineau's erudite logic, many Unitarians writers seem to follow Kant in having two distinct ways of engaging with the world, through the 'scientific function' and the 'ethical function'. It was Wittgenstein who described these as two completely autonomous language games.

Son: Wittgenstein also said that the purpose of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

Father: Yes, what a good metaphor, similar to Rumi's, who asked: 'Why in the plenitude of God's universe have you chosen to fall asleep in this small dark prison?' Somehow, the scientific world-view has emancipated us from one fly-bottle, but has in turn entrapped us in another one, which could be far more catastrophic.

Son: So do you think that the Enlightenment inevitably led to the 'Death of God'? *When Lord Soper got off the plane in New York in the late 1960s, he was asked what he thought about the idea that God was dead. He answered, 'I did not even know he was ill.' ... A post-modernist, asked the same question, replied, 'Which God?'*'

Father: Yes, in many ways, although I believe there are other contributory factors. The established churches have often become linked to the established power systems, and hence liberation movements have often fought to kill off God at the same time as overturning the power of the state.

Son: As in China or Russia? But what about liberation theology?

Father: Well, revolutionary struggles are not only about power, but also about belief systems, and certainly in some parts of the world the liberationists have been inspired and informed by a new theology opposed to the establishment's theology. This is true not only in South America, but in Gandhi's reformed Hindu struggle against British Empire Christianity.

But let us return to how Enlightenment scientific thinking led to the claim that 'God is dead'. Science moved from being a particular form of study to being the dominant way of encountering the world. Scientists taught us not to accept anything on trust, but to examine it empirically, in a fixed unchanging context, such as in a laboratory. Only that which could be repeated by others in an unchanging context and experienced through the senses should be believed. The rest was nonsensical and hence scientific heresy.

Son: Doesn't that create problems for miracles?

Father: Well yes, although many rationalists held on to their religious beliefs, by still allowing a transcendent God to act outside the materialist constraints and the laws of nature that apply to the physical world. However, others allowed God to be the explanation of what we did not yet know, what is sometimes referred to as the 'God of the gaps'.

Son: And the gaps are getting smaller and smaller, so does that mean that the same applies to their God?

Father: Other modern theologians and philosophers have resolved this problem by seeing God as the 'ground of our being', the 'iciness', the 'noumena', or inner essence of the world's phenomena. In this group I would include the phenomenological philosophers who follow on from Husserl and Heidegger, as well as existentialist Christians such as Tillich, Robinson, and Bultmann.

Son: So where does post-modernism come in?

Father: Well, Derrida (like Sartre before him) spent many years studying Heidegger and believed that Heidegger had not taken his own thinking to its logical conclusions. He also took the work of the stucturalists such as Saussure and the post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes and said that they too had failed to follow their own logic to its ultimate conclusion.

Saussure had taken a materialist scientific approach to texts. He was uninterested in any exploration of the motivation or background of the author or the historical or cultural setting, only in analysing the structure of the 'signifiers' on the page and the relationship between them.

Barthes then came along and pointed out that, to be consistent, the structuralists should apply their approach to their own writings, for it is impossible to step outside language to study it empirically: 'The metalanguage in which the semiologist conducts his analysis is metaphorical.' You see, fundamentally there is no place of scientific objectivity to retreat to: all study of language is within language. In this respect I think that Barthes was following on from where Wittgenstein had arrived earlier. But Barthes went on to declare 'the death of the author' —a parallel to the death of God. He pointed out 'that readers create their own meanings, regardless of the author's intentions: the texts they use to do so are thus ever shifting, unstable and open to question' (Appignanesi and Garratt, 1995, p74). He also pointed out that this applies not only to fictional writers but also to scientific writers, and even structuralists and post-structuralists.

Son: And Unitarians? But I am waiting to hear about Derrida.

Father: Well, we are now trying to grasp at meaning, which is like a slippery bar of soap in our hands, and along comes Derrida and says if there is no meta-language, there can be no 'meta-narratives': no all-encompassing philosophies which give meaning to life, the universe, and everything.

Son: That sounds like Douglas Adams.

Father: Well, he is also a great post-modernist writer. But meanwhile Derrida vehemently attacked the whole history of Western philosophy, which he labelled as 'logocentric' —engaged in a perennial search for a perfectly rational language that perfectly represents the real world. He attacks this as not only a search for fool's gold, but also inherently arrogant and totalitarian. Abstracted meta-narratives are a way of creating what Gramsci would have termed an oppressive hegemony, an all-encompassing belief system. The validity of such a system can never be tested or proved, for this would require a meta-meta-narrative, epistemology, and methodology from which to prove it!

Derrida relocates meaning in relationship, not in that which is observed, nor in the theory of the observer. He points out that the observed does not exist without the observer. Unlike Bishop Berkeley, he is not saying that the object does not exist except when it is observed, but that we can know about it only through observation, and the observed, the observer, and the observation cannot sensibly be separated.

Son: Didn't we have a conversation about this once before? When you said that authors did not write plays, but they wrote texts, which became scripts only when actors started speaking their lines, and became plays only when the audience arrived?

Father: Yes, you are right, we agreed that a play was recreated anew every performance, by the author, actors, and audience.

Son: Another trinity.

Father: Shush, not yet! Let us get back to Derrida, who says that you can never have a reasoned belief that is universal, timeless, and unchanging, and that we can study any belief and peel away layer upon layer of constructed meanings. Like an onion, there are only layers, no hard core.

Son: So Derrida is trying to liberate us from certainty and fixed beliefs?

Father: Yes, I believe he is a liberationist, for, just as the mediaeval church had become totalitarian and hegemonically oppressive, so in our own time have reason and science. I believe that Derrida is right in his view that any encompassing belief system, including science, can become arrogant and totalitarian.

Son: So can you.

Father: Indeed! Let me tell you about another key event in postmodernism, which some writers have seen as the moment of its birth.

3.32pm on 15 July 1972. The Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's 'machine for modern living') was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed. Out of the rubble of heroic modernism, architects, artists, filmmakers, philosophers, and writers began to create a collage, patch-work, assemblage, or palimpsest of post-modernity.

Dynamiting the St Louis modernist housing block was a symbolic metanoia — the death of a dream of creating a heaven on earth through human mechanistic ingenuity. Another seminal moment was the publication of The Limits to Growth by the Club of Rome in 1972, which graphically portrayed how our human mechanical ingenuity, far from creating a heaven on earth, was in imminent danger of destroying the earth we are not only in, but part of. Continuous development by humankind towards the future golden age, built on reason, science, and the conquest and control of the natural world, has become a myth fragmented in pieces. But, like the mirror of Hans Christian Anderson's Snow Queen, the shattered glass has left its splinters in our eyes. So we still see through the lens of development and progress. The Holocaust, Chernobyl, the fall of communism, and global warming have so far failed to cure our addiction to science-led growth, expansion, and development. We had become intellectually constipated within our closed mind-sets and needed unblocking.

Son: Post-modernism is the Enema of the Enlightenment?

Father: You could spray-paint that on your university walls. But do you remember my saying that at first I believed that post-modernism was away of counteracting the shadow side of the Enlightenment?

Son: Yes, so what did you believe in the second place?

Father: Well, I went onto believe that we had to liberate ourselves not only from the dominance of the scientific, rationalistic, and mechanistic ways of engaging with the world, but also from the Protestant individualism that Luther and Calvin set in train. Luther, like Galileo, was a great liberationist in his time. He helped to free us from the totalitarian arrogance of the mediaeval church, but liberationists become in turn the next epoch's oppressors.

Son: Luther was the enema of mediaevalism!

Father: Well, he certainly needed one!

Luther had his moment of metanoia when he read the words fide sola', realizing that humanity would get to heaven by faith alone. Up to that moment he had been trying to climb the ladder to heaven by good works, such as cleaning all the monastic latrines, while suffering horrendous constipation. When he saw that you could not get to heaven by effort and development, his bowels opened, he was released from his inner imprisonment and made his stand against the corrupt Church of Rome.

Luther's reformation in its attempt to sweep away the corruption of the church also swept away traditional spiritual practice and the role of a spiritual teacher. Religion became a personal and internal relationship with God. He also built on the implicit determinism of Augustine and argued that God was all-powerful, and that our eternal destiny is determined solely by God. Now he did that for a very good reason at the time, which was to show that you couldn't climb the ladder to heaven by your own efforts; but the result of his doctrine was a theistically determined philosophy. This in time became adopted by the materialists into a scientific determinism, which we can find in Marx and the neo-Darwinians, for whom God becomes the 'blind watch-maker', or just 'the selfish gene'.

Son: So what did you think in the third place, or did you stop with Luther?

Father: No. Through reading Derrida, Ash, Cupitt, and Wittgenstein, I realized that the fly-bottle that we have to climb out of was created by Plato. Each of these four writers has shown in his own way that the first 'Death of God' (and I don't mean the crucifixion, but the modern movement) was incomplete, and we needed 'God's second death'.

The first death of God is not the death of God, but the death of a God-image, the paternalistic old man in the sky; the Enlightenment God who sits at the pinnacle of the patriarchal pyramid or who is the great mechanic in the sky. It is also the death of the modernist God, whom we try to reach through building our skyscrapers, launching our rockets, and 'the improvement of humanity'.

But then we discover, as Don Cupitt has so clearly argued, that dualism provides a false basis, one which underlies our entire culture:'... we need, don't we know it by now, a religion without God, that is a religion without abstracts, without perfection, without closure, without eternity' (Cupitt, 1992, p81). He goes on to say:' So far as all the varied movements of the day have a theme, it is anti-platonism. Plato impressed up on the entire history of Western thought ... a supernaturalism of meanings (essentialism) and of knowledge — all of which has suddenly come to seem absurd and unendurable.'

Son: So why do you think Plato was the baddy?

Father: Well, he wasn't really a baddy at all. Not only was he a great writer and thinker of his time; but, along with Christ, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tsu, and others, he was probably one of the great thinkers of all time. But we have been trapped in his particular fly-bottle for a very long time.

Son: Two and a half thousand years.

Father: Or thereabouts. You see, Plato and Socrates lived at a turning point, at the beginning of urbanization, when people were turning their backs on the participative study of nature and becoming interested in abstract thinking. David Abram has recently shown how this was also the point of turning away from an oral language and tradition, within which Homer's great works were conceived, to a written language. He describes how oral language not only mimics nature, but is located within it, whereas the invention of the alphabet, or alpha-beta, created a language which could focus on internal abstract ideas and ideals, and we could retreat to the back of Plato's cave and just watch the shadows. Plato made his ideal the search and love of the truth. He was one of the originators of Deffida's 'logocentrism'. Gradually Plato's dualistic thinking and abstract search for truth have become what Blake described as 'Newton's single-eyed vision' and the creation of the dogmas of scientific orthodoxy or religious fundamentalism.

Son: So when we have taken the post-modern remedy or poison, got out of the Platonic fly-bottle, suffered not one but two deaths of God, where does that leave us?

Father: That is the problem. Griffin writes about the five major negative consequences of losing belief in God and residing in a deconstructed world, with no meta-narratives. The first peril is that of relativism. He quotes one of Dostoyevsky's characters, who said: 'If there is no God, then everything is permitted.' Without a meta-narrative it is hard to have transcendent values or norms. It is easy for society to descend into selfishness, competition, and a belief that 'anything goes'.

Secondly, nihilism can take hold, and life begins to have no purpose or aim. Weno longer talk of the mediaeval sin of accidie, but that little devil is certainly very powerful in our current Western cultures. Every time you say, 'Why bother? Is it worth it? What difference will it make?', then old accidie is at play.

Son: But life does have a purpose. I need to work hard to get a good degree at university, in order to get a good job.

Father: In order to ... ?

Son: ... make a lot of money.

Father: In order to ...?

Son: I don't know—enjoy myself, own a nice house and car, perhaps?

Father: In order to....? Perhaps we have arrived at Griffin's next peril, that of materialism, 'the insatiable desire to control and possess more and more things' (Griffin, p57). Neo-Darwinian beliefs have added to this the 'ethic of unrestrained competition for the control of material resources, (which) describes the behaviour of modern individuals, corporations and nations' (Griffin p57).

This atheistic materialism leads to the fourth peril, that of militarism, for in a world of unrestrained competition the only way to limit the power of others is through coercive force, which they then have to use to control you. The nuclear arms race was an extreme version of this.

Son: But not everyone we know acts on the basis of the survival of the fittest. Quite a lot of people we know do a lotto support their community.

Father: Before you get too hopeful, notice your phrase, 'their community'. The fifth peril is neo-tribalism. The human need to belong can mean that we will invest in supporting our community, but often in competition with other communities, fighting for my religion, my country, my profession, my football team.

Son: Don't get personal!

Father: There is a sixth peril, to which I think Griffin does not pay enough attention, and that is anthropocentrism, an exclusive focus on one's own species. Even much environmentalism is concerned with humans preserving their place on this planet, discovering how they can manage the earth better!

Son: You paint a very black picture. Is this the dark night of the soul?

Father: We can no longer indulge in our own personal dark nights of the soul, for we now live in such a complex world of inter-dependency, with the possibility of ecological catastrophe, that we must view it as the dark night of the anima mundi, the world soul. But before you go off to try and save the planet, let's learn to fly outside the fly-bottle.

Part Two: The beginnings of a post-modern reconstructive theology

Part One ended with the descent into a post-modern deconstructed world, where there are no certainties, no meta-narratives to live by, where everything is relative and money the only yardstick of value, where belonging leads to neo-tribalism and inter-group conflict, and where experience is of random, jumbled, and disconnected images. A world of television channel-hopping, e-mail communication, consumerism, mass advertising that spawns disconnected multi-cultural images, and a world where my children when visiting New York see it as a series of film locations. A world where corporate self-interest can block serious international efforts to address the ecological crisis. A frightening world that spins, and spins us, faster and faster.

Faced with this world, many seek for life-rafts to cling to in the flood. Some retreat to pre-modern fundamentalism and neo-conservative religion. Others seek foreign mystical paths, or New Age syncretistic religious practices. Some seek causes to fight for, while others retreat into their own inner private fortresses, which become like middle-class homes in Johannesburg or Los Angeles, surrounded by high walls, barbed wire, and security systems.

In 1977 E.F. Schumacher, the radical economist, author of Small is Beautiful and great social commentator, wrote a book called Guide for the Perplexed, in which he argued that the place to start, in facing the frightening and confusing complexities of modern life, was with our ways of knowing the world. This is what philosophers call our epistemology, and it is here that we must start to do the hard work which must precede any real new hope.

The value of post-modernism to Unitarians is not as a new alternative theology, but as a challenging liberation from our traditional beliefs, through giving us new ways of perceiving the world around us. The danger is that it leaves us at a place of deconstruction. Fortunately there is a growing body of reconstructive post-modernist writings which show a way forward from the rubble of past beliefs.

There are many writers from a great variety of disciplines who are working to create a new epistemology which embraces the post-modern deconstructive critique, but then begins to explore new ways of encountering and being a creative participant in the world: in science, such thinkers include Heisenberg, David Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake, and Fritjof Capra, among others. In research methodology, Skolimoski, Reason, and Heron have shown how to develop a way of studying the world which acknowledges our participation in that which we study. Their work builds on anthropologists such as Abram and the systems theories of writers such as Bateson.

In psychology, post-Jungians such as Hillman and Samuels advocate pluralistic ways of engaging with the collective psyche as it is manifested not only in our dreams, but in the collective life we co-create. Also there are those, such as Stollorow and Attwood, who are moving psychotherapy from an obsession with the 'self' to a phenomenological inquiry into the inter-subjective relationship.

In philosophy, Jenks, Spretnak, and others have begun the work of creating a reconstructive post-modernism which suggests new approaches to finding meaning in one's relationship to and participation in the world. This includes full sensory participation in the natural world, through a re-identification with the fullness of our bodily experience, as well as an active engagement with the world of our local community. Charlene Spretnak, in her book The Resurgence of the Real, contrasts deconstructive post-modern and reconstructive post-modern approaches.

What is the religious response to this spiritual, moral, and global crisis? Griffin argues in his excellent writings for a reconstructive post-modern theology that transcends the dualistic arguments of fundamentalists and scientific rationalists and provides a radical challenge to current beliefs. My own experience of involvement, directly and indirectly through colleagues and friends, with a wide range of spiritual movements has led me to believe that there are a number of common elements that the more sophisticated spiritual seeker is looking for.

The first of these is a liberating epistemology. Buddhist philosophy, the Kabbala, or the enneagram all provide frameworks and methodologies which help individuals to think outside of the box (or fly-bottle) within which Western consciousness has imprisoned their thinking and experiencing.

Secondly, many alternative religious approaches embrace the whole person. Protestant Christianity has increasingly failed to find forms which help individuals to bring together their intellect and emotions, reason and mystery, body and soul.

The Protestant tradition, from the time of Luther and Calvin, swept away not only the corrupt authority of many Catholic priests, but also the liberating authority of the true spiritual teacher. Many hunger for a spiritual practice that goes beyond church services, the reciting of creeds and the occasional prayer. Many are in search of a spiritual practice which helps them to balance their inner and outer lives, a spiritual practice which can exist in the midst of the modern world, not just on Sundays or in places of retreat.

Finally, many people currently hunger for a spirituality that will give depth to their experiencing and thinking, their being and doing: a religion that radically returns the word to its origins in the word religio— denoting connection— and helps individuals to relate more fully to themselves and others; and to participate more fully in the world at all levels. They hunger for a holiness in the true root meaning of that word: wholeness and health.

I believe that Unitarianism needs to develop a new form of reconstructive post-modern theology and spiritual practice that meets these needs and liberates us from our own limited mind-sets.

Part Three: The challenge for the Unitarian movement

Before we rush to rebuild a new Unitarian theology, the Unitarian movement has to accept its own descent. James Hillman, the ex-director of the Jung Institute, and founder of archetypal psychology, pointed out that the problem with Christians is that they can only bear to have Good Friday if Easter Sunday is already guaranteed. The reality is that on Good Friday there is no guarantee of resurrection; there is only the surrender to and acceptance of descent.

Van Gennep, in his now classic study of rites of passage, showed how in many different tribes transition rituals, be they connected with puberty, marriage, birth, or burial, began with death. There is no creation without destruction, no transformative new beginning without something dying. To transform Unitarianism, we must first ask: what is it that we must let go of? What is the excess baggage that must be discarded, before the camel can go through the eye of the needle? What must we each surrender in order to be truly open to the emergence of the new?

A Unitarian study group meets at our house, called 'Build Your Own Theology' —or BYOT for short. We jokingly call it 'Blow your own Trumpet'. I find myself musing whether, if we all blow our own trumpets at the same time, we will bring down the walls of Jericho, or whether *we will succeed in bringing down the walls of our beliefs, so that we can meet naked in our uncertainty.*

I believe that the Unitarian groups who are engaged in 'building their own theology' are doing important work, and the courses are well designed to encourage collective exploration of one's deepest beliefs. For these groups to be truly transformative, we must each begin by becoming conscious of our unconscious epistemology and fixed mind-sets, and examine our inherent theology. We must also move on, not to build our own individual theology, which is a modernist endeavour, but to inquire collaboratively into and co-create a new theology between us.

Let me tentatively suggest that, to move forward, what Unitarianism most needs to surrender and bury are some of its cherished beliefs and three of its central pillars: Rationalism, Individualism, and Protest.

Rationalism was central for the Unitarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in their aspirations to build a modern church, liberated from the dogmas of orthodoxy, where individuals were encouraged to think for themselves. It also helped Unitarians to create a church where radical thinkers, poets, and politicians could find community support for their personal beliefs, and a spiritual basis for their work in the world. But if in the post-modern age we cling to rationalism, we will become dusty, bookish, old-style intellectuals, locked in historical modernist libraries, and imprisoned in dualism.

Individualism within Unitarianism is often caricatured by the phrase wherever two or three Unitarians are gathered together, there are at least three or four different opinions!' (Long 1997, p3). Religious freedom and the rights of individuals have been important causes of the last 250 years, and in some parts of the world must still be struggled for. However, in the West individualism has now manifested its shadow side, in a world where a British Prime Minister can claim 'There is no such thing a society', and her Neo-Darwinian politics can produce a culture of unfettered personal competition. In the Unitarian movement, individualism can also manifest its shadow side, when we fail to be true communities or fellowships, and become tolerant collections of opinionated odd-balls.

Protest is at the heart of Protestantism, and whereas other Protestant churches became incorporated into the establishment of their particular societies and countries, Unitarians have always looked for the next wave of dissent. Our Unitarian forebears and elders must be greatly praised for constantly moving forward the struggle for freedom. When freedom of worship was achieved, they moved on to universal suffrage; when that was won, they moved on to universal religious tolerance, and then to oppose sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice. Unitarians have also led other denominations in pioneering female ministry, mixed-faith marriages, and homosexual weddings.

But ultimately a protest movement is only as strong as the orthodoxy it opposes and dissents from. Of course there are still causes to fight for and freedoms to be won, but a protest movement needs a strong orthodoxy; and, as the orthodox religions of Western countries decline, so do their Protestant opposites. As the bonds between church and state grow ever weaker, and the Church of England's strange pluralistic mix of liberals and fundamentalist evangelicals continues, the Unitarian church loses much of its identity and the opposition that held it together.

To the two other pillars of Unitarianism, those of Tolerance and Freedom, I believe we must still raise our glasses as we commune together. They are still much needed in our conflict-ridden world, but they need to be expanded beyond the anthropocentric context of the Enlightenment, to embrace a deep reverence for the ecology of all creation. For humans to be more tolerable on this planet, we must be less tolerant of abuse of the world and its natural resources — perpetrated by ourselves and our fellow humans (particularly first-world Westerners). Our freedoms must be circumscribed, by the limits of sustainability and the principles of nature, as articulated by Karl Henrik Robert and Arnie Ness (see Bibliography). For those of us, like myself, grown greedy for more than our fair share of the earth's resources, we have much to give up.

In addition to our circumscribed tolerance and freedom, I believe we must replace the Enlightenment triad of Rationalism, Individualism, and Protest with a post-modern triad of **Participative Inquiry, Relational Spiritual Practice**, and **Social Action**. We must transform rationalism into participative inquiry; individualism into relational spiritual practice; and protest into social action.

Participative Inquiry is a collaborative process which brings together groups of people in a collective act of inquiring into an area of joint experience. It first requires a process of unlearning, in which we each become aware of and then surrender our fixed beliefs and assumptions. It is only when we have reached a state of unknowing that we can be receptive and open to the emergence of new meaning between us. To engage in this process, we must learn not only the skills of self-awareness and careful listening at a number of levels, but also the disciplines of dialogue.

So often Unitarian discourse can become serial monologues or debate. Now debate is similar to discussion, a word which comes from the same root as 'percussion' and 'concussion' and is about hitting the other person with your pre-formed ideas, while they hit you with theirs. Negotiation or mediation is often a modified version of this, which creates a compromise position. Transformational learning has still not happened. In dialogue ('knowing emerging between'), each person endeavours, while remaining true to his or her own experience, to be open and receptive enough to respect the reality of the other, within his or her own field of experience. This creates a circuit or flow of knowing between the participants.

This can be developed into a form of **Relational Spiritual Practice**, which has been termed 'trialogue' (Blake, 1995). Here the participants hold open the possibility of a third position. This third position, not occupied by any one individual, can be seen as the place of collective witness, or the opening for grace to enter; or, if one is a Christian, the place where the Christ energy enters. ('Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I will be also.') In trialogue we try not only to imagine creatively the reality of the other within us, but also to imagine the emergence of the new, from the third position. We attend to being open to learning and meaning which neither or none of us could possibly have known before we came into disciplined relationship, one with another.

Spiritual practices of dialogue and trialogue can be found in the disciplines developed from Buddhism by Charles Berner and by John Crook. Trialogue encounters between oneself and one's environment have been developed by Fazal Inayat Khan from the traditional Sufi process of engaging with a *chilla* (a task given by a spiritual teacher, the undertaking of which creates an unexpected third experience in the process).

Another example of a post-modern relational spiritual practice can be seen in the work of Ram Dass, who, on a meditation retreat, had all those present practise spiritual chanting, which opened the senses and the emotions, and continue chanting and staying open while watching news film of current atrocities carried out by fellow humans. The world of meditational retreat and the world of encountering life in the raw, when brought into relationship, create a third reality.

The third new pillar, **Social Action**, can probably be truly practised only if it is balanced by the other two pillars. There is a very nice Nasrudin story that goes as follows:

Eventually Nasrudin retired and was sitting with friends looking back on his life. 'When I was young, I was a revolutionary and wanted to change the world. In mid-life I woke up one day and realized that my life was half over and that I had changed no one. So l prayed that I might be given the strength at least to change those close to me. Alas, now I am old, I simply pray each day for the strength to change myself.'

Social action must begin, not with grand motions at conferences, or token protests, but with the Buddhist notion of 'right living'. I need to address and re-address the question: 'How can I be and do in the world, in a way that creates less harm and does more good? "ln one of the twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous process, recovering addicts are asked to write their inventory of the times when they have created harm and the times when they have created goodness, as a step towards acceptance of the truth, responsibility, repentance, and self-forgiveness. Not an easy task for any of us. In the Alcoholics Anonymous prayer, one prays for 'the courage to change what I can change; the humility to accept what I cannot change; and the wisdom to know the difference'.
But social action can stretch as far as we have the skills to relate with awareness. A number of years ago I woke up to the fact that much of the money that drives the stock exchanges of the world came from the pension schemes of people like you and me. No longer could I merely blame rich capitalists! I had to discover what responsibility I was prepared to take for the ways in which my pension money was being put to work in the world, and to accept the fact that l probably have more power to change the world through my pension contributions than through my election vote. But how hard I find it to continue taking active responsibility for something that feels so distant and the connections so impersonal.

Son: Do you see what you have done?

Father: No, what?

Son: You have rushed into solutions. This is hypocritical, when you yourself have written about how the rush to solutions is one of the great dangers that interrupt true transformational process.

Father: But then I believe that we often teach what we most need to learn.

Son: You are also guilty of indulging in rationalism, individualism, and—what is more — protesting about the current state of Unitarianism.

Father: Please forgive me, for know not what l do until you show me.

We must return together to asking 'quality questions'. These are questions to which you or l do not already know the answers; or ones to which there is no simple or yes/no answer. If we struggle with quality questions together in dialogue, or trialogue, we will have a good hope of us all discovering new learning and meaning.

Questions for discussion

These are the questions that I offer as my contribution to a participative and collaborative inquiry into the transformation of the Unitarian movement.

1. What is it that the Unitarian movement can uniquely do that the world really needs?

2. What difference would it make to the world if the Unitarian movement ceased to exist?

3. What core values should be at the heart of the Unitarian movement in a post-industrial, post-modern world? In a world which can no longer afford to be individualistic or anthropocentric, where we have reached the limits of growth and the nemesis of rationality and reason?

4. Wherein lies our common purpose that is more than the sum of our individual purposes?

5. What sort of collective spiritual practice would create a balance with the outer work of Unitarians in social action?

I shared these questions at a Unitarian workshop for collaborative inquiry in January 1998 and also as part of the Essex Hall Lecture at the General Assembly in April 1998 (Hawkins, 1998). If you were not there, I hope you will join me, in absentia, and engage in participative inquiry with these and your own questions, with colleagues, friends, or members of your religious fellowship.
Thank you.

Peter Hawkins

PS: If you have, thank you for travelling the distance with me. But ...

Who is the third who walks beside you?
When I count, there ore only you and I together But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
– But who is that on the other side of you?
(T.S. Eliot: 'The Wasteland')

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Unitarianism

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Unitarians and Other Religions

Vernon Marshall

The relationship between Unitarians and other religions is a long and enduring one, with many twists and turns. Over two hundred years ago Unitarians began to study other world religions from an objective and academic viewpoint. In the nineteenth century, contacts began to be made with other religious communities, when a genuine dialogue between the religions became possible. More recently efforts have been made to integrate insights from other world religions into Unitarian theology and worship. This essay aims to identify some of the individuals and events which affected the character of Unitarianism in its relationship with the great religions of the world.

The study of world religion

One of the first Europeans to discover the sacred literature of India was a Unitarian, although he lived his life at a time when Unitarianism as an organized movement was only just beginning to take shape. **Sir William Jones** (1746-1794) was a judge in the Supreme Court of Bengal who was later to become a parliamentarian and political reformer (Holt 1938, p75). While a student at Oxford, he took extra lessons in Arabic from a native of Aleppo. While serving in Bengal, he studied Sanskrit grammar and Hindu law and published the *Asiatic Researches*, the first European journal devoted to Oriental studies. In 1786 he compared the languages of Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, and concluded that they had similar grammars. It was his belief that their similarities were not accidental (Lowenstein 1996, p 150) and that there was thus a historical relationship between South European and Indian culture. Jones then went on to translate the classical Sanskrit play Shakuntala in 1789 and the Hindu Laws of Manu in 1794 (Sharpe 1975, p21). He planned a complete digest of Hindu and Muslim laws, but died before his project was completed.

It was not only linguistics that exercised the minds of early Unitarian scholars. In the nineteenth century, Unitarians contributed to the developing discipline of Comparative Religion. In the United States **William Rounseville Alger** (1822-1905) produced a book, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life* (1860), which expounded the doctrines of the world's great religions by comparing them with the tenets of Christianity. According to a major historian of American Unitarianism, Alger's book 'is a work of ripe scholarship and great literary merit, and is everywhere recognised as an authority' (Cooke 1902, p422). However, the work of Alger was to be overshadowed by that of his friend **James Freeman Clarke** (1810-1888), a writer and academic who became Professor of Theology at Harvard University. Clarke was one of the earliest academics to offer lectures on Comparative Religion, which he began to do in 1867. His greatest contribution to the academic study of world religions was perhaps his two-volume *Ten Great Religions* (1781 and 1883). The books were very accessible for the general reader, as the material concerning the world's religions was laid out tidily under various headings which would have had some meaning for Christians. Thus there were topics such as God, the Soul, the Future Life, Prayer and Worship, and Salvation.

A number of scholars have considered Clarke's two-volume book to have been instrumental in giving a new impetus to the academic study of religions (Starbuck 1937, p219; Sharpe 1975, p137). The work was so popular that there had been thirty editions of *Ten Great Religions* by 1893. Clarke's approach was to display the material regarding the beliefs of other religions in such a way as to reveal that knowledge of God was not limited to adherents of the Christian faith. Clarke still believed that God was fully revealed only within Christianity, but he held that other religions offered partial disclosures of God's revelation. There was, in Clarke's view, a gradation of religions, beginning with the tribal religions, then progressing through the 'ethnic' religions and leading to the 'catholic' religions. The most advanced religion of all, however, was, according to Clarke, that of Christianity (Clarke, 1871, p31).

Clarke evinced a great sympathy for other religions; he asserted that God's providence could be discovered even within 'heathenism' (ibid, p12). However, he was not tempted to idealize the world's religions: 'Each system has its truths and errors, and he aimed to show that humankind needs a religion that is universal in scope' (Geldbach 1982, p60). Clarke's approach to the study of world religions recognized the significance of the new knowledge of other religions, and this he made available to the general public. There were flaws in his presentation, however. He did tend to present religions as if they were clearly defined packages of doctrines. He did not seem to recognize the differences within religions. He also focused on aspects of religion that would be of interest to Christians, when those aspects may have been minor matters for adherents of the religion in question. Nonetheless, Clarke's contribution to the study of world religions was significant. He is credited with the impetus given, for example, to the formation of the Free Religious Association, a movement established on the broadest lines of the new study and strongly supported by Unitarians, of which more will be said later in this essay. This impetus alone is sufficient reason to celebrate the honoured place in the history of Comparative Religion of James Freeman Clarke, a convinced and devout Unitarian.

J. Estlin Carpenter

The Unitarian contribution to the study of the world's religions cannot be considered without reference to the significant work of **Joseph Estlin Carpenter** (1844-1927). Carpenter was a British Unitarian minister who became, after ministries in Clifton, Bristol and Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, a member of the teaching staff of what was then called Manchester New College, sited at that time in London. After its move to Oxford, the College became known simply as Manchester College and is now known as the Manchester Academy and Harris College. Carpenter ultimately became Principal and was also a Lecturer in Comparative Religion within the University of Oxford, though he was also a scholar of note in Biblical Studies.

Carpenter began writing on Comparative Religion when he was 35 years of age. His speciality was Indian religion, and his early years at Manchester College saw a number of essays outlining the thought-forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. As with a number of scholars before him, such as F.D. Maurice, Max Muller, and Monier Williams, he constantly sought to find parallels between Christianity and other faith systems, thus revealing a basic similarity of expression among the different religions. When dealing with the religions of the East, he tended to use a language more commonly associated with Christian doctrine and thereby presented them in such a way that they appeared almost identical to the Western Christian parallel. In all his writings he sought to differentiate between that which was particular to a given religion and that which was universal. A consistent feature of his work was the respect that he felt was due to all the major religious he examined.

Of particular significance to the development of Carpenter's work was his association with the Pali Text Society and with the great Pali scholar T. W. Rhys Davids. Pali is the ancient language in which are written what is believed to be the earliest and most complete collection of Buddhist sacred writings by Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. (It should be noted that Mahayana Buddhists would not consider the Pali Canon as the complete canon.) Carpenter's grasp of Pali was such that two of the volumes of the *Digha Nikaya* were transcribed by him alone (Carpenter, 1903; 1911). The *Digha Nikaya* is part of a longer text, known as the Sutta Nikaya, containing the discourses attributed to the Buddha. It is one of the three sections of the Pali Canon, known also as the *Tipitaka*. The publication of the Sumangala-Vilasini (1886), a commentary on the Digha Niksya by Buddhaghosa, the fourth- or fifth-century scholar-monk and commentator on the Pali canon, was perhaps more of an achievement for Carpenter and greater evidence of his Pali skills. Copies of the commentary were less carefully preserved than the Pitaka texts themselves; they were difficult to procure, the texts were difficult to understand, as copyists were prone to making blunders, and many of the passages were simply unintelligible (Carpenter 1886, pviii). The resulting work was a clearly presented commentary, in Pali, which coherently identified the passages in the *Digha Nikaya* on which Buddhaghosa's comments were based.

Carpenter was convinced of the importance of Comparative Religion in theological education and he stressed the importance of the discipline for developing a healthy theology. He argued that a study of other religions would enable the Christian to eschew those aspects of Christianity that had lost their meaning. He supported his argument by means of a number of parallels, striving to reveal the features common to all religions. He pointed out, for example, that Gautama and Jesus were both humans, both started with a definite aim, and both gathered disciples around them. Both sent disciples to preach abroad, neither carried money, both travelled, and both sought solitude (Carpenter, 1924, pp171-2). Carpenter identified parallels in a number of writings and was followed in this pursuit by several others working in the field. In 'How Japanese Buddhism Appeals to a Christian Theist' (1906), he showed how the Buddha evolved from a historical person into something greater and more mystical; he compared this process with the evolution, from the human Jesus, of the idea of the mystical Christ figure. Also, in *Christianity in the Light of Historical Science* (1905), he found parallels with the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection in the Greek mysteries and the legend of Attis.

Parallels were pursued by Carpenter in a number of his books and essays, especially in those concerned with a comparison of Buddhism and Christianity. For example, when Buddhist counterparts to a number of myths were found in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Carpenter asked why such parallels existed, and whether there had been a wholesale borrowing of myths or whether the legends began from a single central source. Parallels were analysed in *Buddhism and Christianity: a Contrast and a Parallel* (1924). However, in this essay, Carpenter made more of the contrasts between those two religions. He found it very difficult to come to terms with Buddhism's doctrine of karma and its lack of a need for a personal God. He also made much of the absence, in Buddhism, of a divine Creator, and of the notion of the impermanent Self, though these aspects of Buddhism would already be known by Western scholars. Nevertheless, he considered these to be important factors which differentiated Buddhism from Christianity. While he respected other religions, and had an especially high regard for Buddhism, he nonetheless still considered Christianity superior. The doctrine of *karma* was a particular problem for him in this regard. (Karma is a moral law of cause and effect by which the sum of a person's actions is carried forward from one life to the next, leading to an improvement or deterioration in that person’s fate.)

Some of Carpenter's works on Comparative Religion were less concerned with making comparisons between the religions and more with surveying the beliefs of the world's religions. One such book was *Comparative Religion* (1913), which also gave a brief history of the discipline itself. It was a controversial book, making the claim that there was an essential unity between all the world's religions. This was one of Carpenter's abiding beliefs, which several of his works sought to justify. Here he claimed the existence of a unity of religious consciousness. 'Theologies are many, but religion is one' (Carpenter, 1913, p34), he asserted. The book is also of interest in that it gave prominence to the contribution of the evolutionary hypothesis to Comparative Religion. All study of the history of religion, he affirmed, was based on an evolutionary premise, '... the general movement of human things advances from the cruder and less complex to the more refined and developed' (ibid, p33).

One of Carpenter's most celebrated works was *Theism in Medieval India* (1921), originally given as lectures in 1919. The aim of the book was to distinguish between the various periods in the history of Indian religious philosophy, beginning at a very early stage. Again, Carpenter displayed his interest in the parallels between elements of Indian religion and aspects of Christianity. He compared the doctrine of the Trinity with that of the *trimurti*, or 'three forms', the Hindu triad which manifests the cosmic functions of the Supreme Being, as represented by Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. He showed how ancient religion had a tendency to use trinities or threesomes. Babylon had its trinity of Anu, Bel, and Ea, while Egypt worshipped Osiris, Isis, and Horns. Even Homer spoke of the triad of the three rulers Zeus, of the heavens, Poseidon, of the earth and the sea, and Hades, of the nether realm. Carpenter also compared the growing elevation of the person of the Buddha with the way that belief in the human Jesus grew into worship of the divine Christ, showing how brahmin expectations of an exalted being, the Maha Purusha, became associated with the Buddha. The book, a very clear and detailed analysis of Indian religious thought, was well received at the time for contributing a wealth of knowledge of the thought-forms of Eastern religion. One scholar commended Carpenter for his erudition, and suggested that this book 'must, in my opinion, be regarded as the standard work on that subject' (Widgery 1922, pviii).

The systematic study of non-Christian religions, though not begun by Unitarians, was certainly encouraged and assisted by them. In the nineteenth century another British Unitarian scholar in this field, the **Revd Robert Travers Herford** (1860-1950), studied the Hebrew religion of two thousand years ago. He was concerned, not only with the Hebrew scriptures, but also with first-century Judaism and with the Talmud. His work was highly esteemed by Jewish scholars themselves.

The discipline once known as Comparative Religion, now more commonly known as the Study of Religion or the History of Religion, though a subject for study within the universities, came much later into school curricula, However, it was a Unitarian who pioneered the teaching and comparison of the world's religions in Indian schools. **Margaret Barr** (1897-1973) spent many years working among the people of Assam on a number of projects. As an experiment carried out at a Calcutta girls' school from 1933 to 1936, she created her own course of studies, objectively considering the different religious traditions of India and comparing them with Christianity. The course was later produced as a text book and is a model of objectivity and broadmindedness (Barr, 1937).

Inter-faith dialogue

As we have seen, Unitarians have made a major contribution to the academic study of the religions of the world. However, it would be a grave mistake to assess any religion on the grounds of its sacred literature alone. Religions are living, developing entities and, in order to have some understanding of their insights and wisdom, it is necessary to have contact with their contemporary adherents. There have always been a number of isolated figures in history who have involved themselves in some kind of inter-faith dialogue. Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) adopted an ecumenical attitude towards other religions, especially Islam after the fall of Constantinople. Akbar (1542-1605), Emperor of the Mughal Empire of India for almost fifty years, is another fine example, Having a lively curiosity, Akbar established a House of Worship, where religious leaders of all persuasions could discuss their faiths. However, such examples were rare until the turn of the twentieth century.

The real beginning of the inter-faith movement can be traced back to the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. Unitarians were to play a major role in its organization and in the International Association for Religious Freedom, the association which was to be created later and which found its inspiration in the Parliament. One of the three principal organizers of the Parliament, and its secretary, was a prominent Unitarian minister. The **Revd Jenkin Lloyd Jones** was a Welshman who was related to Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect. The other two principal organizers were a Presbyterian minister and a member of the Swedenborgian Church. Also on the preparatory committee was **Dr A. J. Canfield**, a minister of the Universalist Church, a movement which was to merge with the American Unitarians in 1961. Although most participants were North American Protestants nonetheless there were a number of devotees of Eastern religions present. Several papers were presented by eminent Unitarians and Universalists, Estlin Carpenter's contribution being read by someone else in his absence. It was significant that many of the papers delivered by the Unitarians were by women, and this reveals something of the progressive nature both of the Parliament and of the Unitarian movement.

Whether or not the Parliament was successful depends on one's viewpoint. Many mainstream Christian organizations attacked it as an outrage upon Christianity. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for example. refused to endorse it. However, for those of a liberal frame of mind, the Parliament was a success. It succeeded in creating the notion of a worldwide fellowship of religious believers, bringing together adherents who had differing faiths yet could benefit from the sharing of insights and philosophies. It led to the founding of the first international inter-faith organization. This body was created in 1900, with Unitarians holding its major offices. Known then as the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers, it is now known as the International Association for Religious Freedom. Its first President was Estlin Carpenter, who addressed its congresses on a regular basis, The first Secretary of the International Council was the **Revd Charles Wendte** (1844-1931), an American Unitarian minister in Boston (Chryssides, 1998, pp75-6), Since then Unitarians have continued to be major officeholders in the movement.

Conservative believers had little interest in the inter-faith movement, instead seeking converts to their own beliefs (Williams, 1993, p8). Liberal thinkers were inspired by the Parliament, however, and a number of local parliaments were created, many of them established by Unitarian effort. A 1900 World Parliament of Religions, for example, was held in the Oakland Unitarian Church in the United States and addressed by Swami Vivekananda (Williams, 1993, p8). Vivekananda was a leader of the Ramakrishna Order, which practised a reformed Hinduism inspired by the Upanishads, the later texts of the sacred writings known as the Vedas. Unitarians were also involved, though to a lesser extent, with other international inter-faith organizations. The founding of the World Congress of Faiths by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1936 was partly due to the instigation of the **Revd Will Hayes**, Unitarian minister, whose book of inter-faith services, *Every Nation Kneeling* (1954), has been used by them at their international gatherings. Hayes was active also in an earlier organization, the Fellowship of Faiths. Young Unitarians have also been constantly active in the International Religious Fellowship, a youth movement founded in 1923 as the Leiden International Bureau, established to bring young people from different religions together for fellowship and exchange visits, British Unitarians have also been active with the recently formed Inter-Faith Network. In 1997, the Unitarian General Assembly in Britain joined the World Conference on Religion and Peace, a movement of religions with members in over one hundred countries, co-operating to promote international peace.

It is not only through formal inter-faith organizations that Unitarians have been in dialogue with members of other religions. By contact with the Indian religious group, the Brahmo Samaj, founded in 1830 by Rammohun Roy (1772-1883), Unitarians became gradually familiar with Indian religious concepts. Roy was a Hindu who came to question the religion of his inheritance and studied Buddhism in Tibet. He worked for some years as a revenue collector until he inherited his deceased brother's wealth in 1811 He published a number of works in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, with the aim of challenging the worship of images. He also helped to abolish the practice of sati, the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres He produced an English abridgement of the Vedanta, with a digest of the Veda. Roy accepted the morality preached by Jesus, but rejected the claims about his divinity and the miracles which were ascribed to him. He wrote a number of pamphlets hostile to Hinduism and to Christian Trinitarianism. His theological outlook was rationalistic and deistic.

Although the Brahmo Samaj has never been large, and has tended to be composed of middle-class intellectuals, it nonetheless allowed Unitarians to develop some insight into the philosophical bases of Indian religion. Contacts with the Brahmo Samaj have continued to this day, and joint meetings between the Samaj and Indian Unitarians take place on a regular basis. The Samaj has also sent individuals to study theology in the USA, alongside Unitarian-Universalist ministerial students.

Unitarians have long had contacts with liberal groups in the Hindu tradition. In the nineteenth century these included the Devalaya Church Institute, a free-thinking and non-dogmatic organization, and followers of Thakur Dayananda Deb and Togendra Chose (Herford, 1929, pp83-4). Eminent Unitarians earlier in the twentieth century also had contact with Japanese religious groups, the leaders of which were impressed by Unitarian efforts to understand oriental religion (Farnell, 1929, p178). In more recent years, mainly through its participation in the International Association for Religious Freedom, Unitarians have formed contacts with the Japanese lay Buddhist group, the Rissho Kosei-kai.

Unitarians have also taken the initiative to seek dialogue with a number of different religious groups. In 1992 a Unitarian–Muslim Colloquium took place in Oxford, and in 1993 discussions took place in London between Unitarian and Sufi representatives. Individual congregations have developed their own inter-faith contacts, some of them involving discussions with a number of the new religious movements. In the early 1990s the Unitarian New Meeting Church in Birmingham organized a programme of events lasting a couple of years, entitled 'Outside the Mainstream'. Representatives of several religious movements were invited to share their insights with Unitarians. These movements included the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and many others.

Unitarianism and a theology of world religions

One of the consequences of conducting dialogue with adherents of other religions is that some of the perceived differences between them tend to break down. For some Unitarians all the religions of the world have been thought of as mere semblances of one underlying religion, which manifests itself in different ways and at different times. In the middle of the nineteenth century the call of **James Martineau** (1805-1900) for a faith based upon the enlightened conscience meant that traditional Bible-based Unitarianism was being challenged by a movement of thought that allowed for the integration of insights from other religions.

In north America the Transcendentalist movement had a similar effect. Inspired by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm De

Wette, the Transcendentalists called for a natural religion authenticated by the inner witness of the truth. It questioned the miraculous foundations of Christianity on the one hand and expressed sympathy for Eastern religions and philosophies on the other. The Transcendental Club, sometimes known as the Symposium, formally established itself in the United States in 1836 under the leadership of **Frederic H. Hedge, Samuel Ripley**, and —the most celebrated of all — **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882). Its relationship with Unitarianism was not always clear, as some members retained their commitment to the Unitarian movement, while others kept their distance.

The idea that there is a universal faith beneath the particularities of each major religion has now become a common feature of the theologies of some Unitarians. Many such have called themselves Universalists. The word 'universalism' originally referred to belief in the salvation of all people, rather than the salvation of an elite few. This was a central tenet of the Universalist Church of America, which merged with the American Unitarian Association in 1961 to form the Unitarian–Universalist Association. Universalism has now taken on a new meaning, which involves the belief in a single world religion, manifested in different ways in different cultures. One prominent Universalist was the American minister **Jabez Sunderland**, who said, 'Unitarianism stands for ... the doctrine that all the religions of the world, in their essence and their deepest principles, are one' (Sunderland,1911,pp89-90).

This pan-religionist position has never been the most dominant one within Unitarianism. However, there have been for many years a number of representatives of this position who have taken steps to create a universal religion, either within Unitarianism or by using the Unitarian movement as a vehicle for its creation. It was in Boston, USA, in 1867 that the **Revd Francis Abbot** formed his Free Religious Association, which was based on the principle of free inquiry and was open to members of all faiths. Its first President, **Octavius Brooks Frothingham** (1822-1895), was an eminent Unitarian minister who later formed an Independent Liberal Church in New York, more radical even than the mainstream Unitarian movement of his day. The first secretary of the Free Religious Association, **William Potter**, was also a celebrated Unitarian. Abbot's intention was that the principles of the Free Religious Association should become integral to the Unitarian denomination; when this did not come about, he withdrew from the Unitarian ministry.

After the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, Jenkin Lloyd Jones became so impatient with the American Unitarian movement's inability to become the means of developing a universal religion that he created a new movement, based on the most liberal of principles and known as the Free Church Movement. He envisaged a universal religion whose tenets would include human growth and mutual service: 'Let us build a temple of universal religion dedicated to the enquiring spirit of progress, to the helpful service of love' (Braybrooke 1993, p5).

There were such believers in Britain too, although they remained loyal to the Unitarian movement. In 1875 the **Revd Peter Dean** formulated before his Unitarian congregation in Clerkenwell the following affirmation of faith for use in public worship.

Faith in an infinitely perfect God is all our Theology,
The Universe is our Divine Revelation.
The Manifestations of Nature and the Devotional Literature of all Times
and Peoples are our Bible....
The goodness incarnated in humanity is our Christ.

Every guide and helper is our Saviour.
Increasing personal holiness is our salvation.
The normal wonders of Nature are our Miracles....
Love to God and love to man —piety and morality— are our only sacraments.
(Clerkenwell Unitarian Church 1875)

One British Unitarian who, after the Great War, sought to turn Unitarianism into a universal faith, absorbing elements from the different religions, was the **Revd Will Hayes** (1890-1959), who for many years served as minister of the Chatham congregation. He posited the idea that there were two kinds of Unitarian, the Christian Unitarian and the Universalist, or, to use his own words, 'the Christocentric' and 'the Unitarians of the United World' (Hayes, 1938, p5). He became leader of the Free Religious Movement, an association founded by the **Revd Walter Walsh**, with the declared aim of creating 'The Brotherhood of Nations through the Sisterhood of Religions'. Hayes also founded the Order of the Great Companions, a movement which sought to prepare the way for the establishment of one world religion, what he called the Church of the Great Companions. The Great Companions were the seers and mystics of all ages and all countries and from all religious traditions. The Order published a number of books in the 1930s, many of them by Hayes himself, exploring the beliefs of other religions and striving to show how the religions could be synthesized into one universal faith.

It must not be assumed that all Unitarians have adopted a pan-religionist approach to their faith. A significant number of individual Unitarians and a number of congregations count themselves as integral parts of the Christian tradition and do not wish to part from it. A Commission set up to assess British Unitarian theology in the 1960s asserted its refusal to build a religion on what might be considered the lowest common denominator.

We believe that we should be on guard against the facile assumption that all world religions really say the same thing, and that our ultimate aim should be some kind of world-faith, made up of an amalgam of existing religions. (General Assembly, 1964, p21)

However, the Commission did declare its belief that all world religions are in contact with the same Divine Spirit. It is for this reason that Unitarians have been able to benefit from the in sights, the stories, the sacred writings, and the musical traditions of other religions.

Another way in which Unitarianism has developed through interest in other religions is the changes, often quite radical, in its forms of public worship. For many years Unitarian worship has been enriched by material drawn from non-Christian traditions. As long ago as 1886 it was reported that a number of Unitarian ministers, such as **Frank Walters** of Glasgow, **J. Taylor** of Preston, and **Peter Dean** of Clerkenwell, selected material for readings during services of worship from 'the sacred literature of all ages and peoples' (d'Alviella 1886, p92). In *Every Nation Kneeling*, Hayes brought together writings from the great sages, ancient hymns from the East, and prayers from every tradition, and arranged them in an orderly form suitable for use by any British congregation. In the United States, where many Jews have joined Unitarian–Universalist congregations, Jewish rituals have often been adopted by worshippers seeking to give their devotions a wider appeal. The *Communion Book* (Seaburg, 1993) contains orders of worship for Unitarian–Universalist celebrations of the Passover, together with a Seder service and a Haggadah. In recent years British Unitarians have begun to sing hymns, either adapted from material from non-Christian religions, or written especially with non-Christian symbols in mind. Compositions by John Storey (1935-98) are particularly noteworthy.

Confucian wisdom, Christian care,
The Buddhist way of self-control,
The Muslim's daily call to prayer,
Are proven path ways to the goal.
(Knight, 1985,p130)

Unitarians are becoming more familiar with the works of poets, gurus, and philosophers from all parts of the world. Words of wisdom are used as affirmations, as statements to accompany chalice lightings, as meditations or prayers, and as songs of celebration. It is not only the written material from Eastern religions that is used: there is now a trend to explore ancient spirituality such as that of paganism and Native American religion. In the United States the Covenant of Unitarian–Universalist Pagans, and in Britain the New Age Unitarian Network have been established to reclaim non-Christian Western spirituality for Unitarian congregations and individuals.

Unitarians, then, have developed an interesting relationship with the religions of the world. Whether there is 'a religion behind the religions' is a matter of debate among Unitarians, as it is among adherents of other religious movements. However, whatever their opinions, Unitarians are willing to accept that religious truth is not their exclusive possession. Unitarianism is a very diverse movement; its members would variously wish to define their stance in terms of Liberal Christianity, Non-Christian Theism, Universalism, Humanism, or Neo-Paganism. These terms may even fail to define what many Unitarians believe. What Unitarians do have in common, however, is the belief that the spiritual insights and experiences of other religious traditions are of value. The unanswerable question, at least for the present, is how far Unitarians can absorb such insights, and what will be the ultimate consequences. Only the future will be able to give us that answer.

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Question for discussion

1. In what way can Unitarians describe themselves as 'Christian'? Is it possible, or desirable, to create a one-world religion based on the highest common factor?
2. Are all religions of equal value? If not, what is it that defines them as being of value?
3. What does Unitarianism have to offer other religions?
4. In the light of its inter-faith achievements and emphasis on world faiths, could 'Universalism' take on a new meaning for Unitarians?
5. Would 'Universalist' be a better name for the denomination than 'Unitarian' now?
6. What has your own congregation achieved in the field of inter-faith ventures? What scope might here by for further development here?

The author

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Forgotten Prophets - Unitarian Women and Religion

Ann Peart

A masculine monopoly in religion begins when Miriam raises her indignant question: 'Does the Lord speak only through Moses?'. Since then in all three of the great religious groups stemming from the land and books of Israel —Judaism, Christianity and Islam — men have formulated doctrine and established systems of worship, offering only meager opportunity for expression of the religious genius of womankind'. (Crook, 1964, p1)

If a woman born and bred in any of these faiths takes a comprehensive look at the form of theology best known to her, she discovers that it is masculine in administration, in the phrasing of its doctrines, liturgies and hymns. It is man-formulated man-argued, man-directed. (Ibid, p5)

Theology is man-constructed; but women have to live with it and must aspire to share it. Too often ... we accept the findings presented to us as if they were the last word. We cannot afford to do this.... We must help to revise and reshape some of the great pre-supposition sin the thought and practice of religion.(Ibid, p9)

This deconstruction of the formation of Western religion and its call for women to claim their right to their own religious expression would not be unusual if it were found in a contemporary work of feminist theology; but these extracts are taken from a book published in 1964, well before other works on the subject. It was written by Margaret Crook, who was minister of the (Unitarian) Octagon Chapel in Norwich from 1918 to 1920 before she went to the USA, where she taught biblical studies. In her retirement she wrote several books, including Women and Religion, from which my opening quotations are taken.

Margaret Crook: pioneer Unitarian feminist

In her ground-breaking work, Crook argues that in early religions and societies the roles of men and women may have had more equal status than was later accorded to them. She charts briefly the 'disbarment of women from positions of authority' which characterizes Christianity and Judaism (ibid, p2), before offering a detailed study of the treatment of the story of Eve and its effects on the Church. Eve is reclaimed as a 'daring innovator who claims the right of human parentage, and also the conservative, distrusting the new religion in which Israel's God assumes his right as creator of life and lord of Eden'(ibid, p22).

Crook argues that misogynist practices such as persecution of witches (who were often midwives), the churching of women after childbirth, and the churches' condemnation of abortion and birth control are related to this history. She searches the Hebrew Bible for more positive presentations of women's roles — for example, as mothers and prophetesses. But what she finds is the eclipse of the priestess:

Israel's story yields the most dramatic and consistent account the world has ever known of the loss of woman's ancient official share in the public observance of religion, of her relegation to a role almost exclusively domestic, and to marriage as her only vocation. The abolition of women's priestly status runs parallel with the rise of the learned man, the theologian, and philosopher, who fails to share with her an exciting exploration into the realm of the mind. (Ibid,p56)

This increasing emphasis on men's voices, and the relegation of women to the domestic scene, is not total, however, as stories still survive in the Bible of women such as Judith, 'lone-handed commando' (ibid, p90), and Esther, who 'stands alone' (ibid, p91). In the writings of Josephus, we learn of Queen Alexandra (whose Jewish name was Salome) and her strong and wise rule: after the death of her two Maccabean husbands, she restored to power the Jewish teachers known as the Pharisees. Crook describes her (ibid, p95) as acting 'with speed and decision'.

The context of women's lives in the earliest Christian circles is then reviewed, and Paul's teaching is examined, both for its support for women preachers and for its later misogynist perversions. More positive presentations of women in religious thought are revealed in the characters of Lady Wisdom, the mother church, and Mary, cast as virgin, queen of heaven, and mother of God.

Crook's historical overview of women in the churches in the last two centuries is prefaced by the following comment:

Women never know from one period to another what profit will come to them or what loss be incurred. Whenever endowment by holy Spirit is freely offered, 'Multitudes both of men and women' respond (Acts 5:14). Before long, restrictions are placed on the women's share. Usually they acquiesce, either because they have no alternative or because they do not realize what is at issue. (p197)

The inclusion of Katherine, wife of the reformer Martin Luther, the (unnamed) mother of the dissenting minister Philip Doddridge, and Susanna Wesley, mother of Charles and John, founders of Methodism, emphasizes the importance of women as mothers of ministers - 'queens of the manse' rather than 'queen of heaven'.

The book gives some indication of the status of women at Manchester College, where Crook trained for the Unitarian ministry, from the late eighteenth century, when, according to Joseph Priestley, women could attend lectures but not teach, to the 1950s, when at last this ban was lifted as Crook became a visiting lecturer for two years in succession. She does not mention the long period in the nineteenth century when women were excluded from lectures, and the battles of Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Swanwick for permission to attend in the 1870s (with James Martineau's now familiar excuse that the facilities of the building made it inconvenient for ladies to attend, as they would have to pass through the men's quarters). However, Unitarian women, including Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Sarah Flower Adams, are acknowledged among others in a list of significant hymn writers (ibid, pp210-11). Women writers with Unitarian connections who explored religious questions included Marian Evans (George Eliot) and Harriet Martineau, but Crook omits to mention the part played by the Unitarian Harriet Taylor Mill in the writing of The Subjection of Women, attributed to John Stuart Mill.

This account of women's contributions to religious life is balanced by a matching summary of men's influence. Crook comments on the doctrines of the oneness of God, the uniqueness of the son, and the exclusion of a female element from the Trinity. In ecclesiology she mentions the exclusive nature of ecumenical activity, and the emphasis on systems, remarking: 'The masculine road to spiritual security consists in defining an all-inclusive system of faith and action without regard to the existence of other contemporaneous systems, in standing for universal propaganda, and thus ensuring the competition of all'(ibid, p225).

In contrast to this, Crook considers that women, conditioned by long years of rearing families, are more inclined to favour a co-operative approach, and she argues for a more balanced partnership between men and women in matters of religion. The ministry of women among the Society of Friends and in Unitarianism is mentioned, though it is acknowledged that the figures for Unitarians in America show fewer active recognized women ministers in 1948 and 1963 than in 1900 — an example of the erosion of gains in women's status (ibid, p237).

Crook ends her book on women and religion by examining the search for meaning among male philosophers and scientists, and pleading for a contribution from women which `can take the form of an affirmation that there may be an affinity between the natural and the spiritual elements comprising the totality of our experience'(ibid, p240).

Scientific knowledge requires us to rethink our concept of God, says Crook, using both masculine and feminine capacities. She suggests conceiving of 'God-Emergent', with humans having a share in a divine process which is evolutionary and open-ended, without a known conclusion.

British responses

In her strikingly original work, Crook exposed the male construction of the Bible, of theology and of religious practices, and challenged women to take part in reshaping religion and theology. Unitarian women on both sides of the Atlantic are doing just this, though most have never heard of Margaret Crook or read her challenging words.

In Britain the issues raised by Crook were taken up in a variety of ways in the early 1980s, often inspired by work being done in the USA. in the spring of 1981 Keith Gilley, minister of Golders Green Unitarians in North London, preached a series of sermons on feminist theology, using *Womanspirit Rising, a Feminist Reader in Religion*, which he had brought back from the United States the previous year. This stimulated the women's group in the congregation to explore feminist theology and women's spirituality for themselves. They produced a remarkable series of services, mainly for the summer solstice, in the following years, using material celebrating the feminist reconstruction of pre-Christian nature religions, such as Starhawk's Spiral Dance.

In the same year, 1981,women from various parts of the country started anew national women's group with a specifically feminist stance, charged with examining what it means to be a Unitarian feminist. Topics studied have included spirituality, money, power, violence, sexuality, God, and the status and participation of women in the British Unitarian movement. Although the denomination is noted for its rhetoric and theology of equality, the policy of equal opportunities does not always seem to be as effective as it could be, especially where positions of real power and influence are concerned. The 'stained-glass ceiling' has not been completely shattered: no woman has yet been appointed to serve as General Secretary of the denomination, or as Principal of either of the two ministerial training colleges; and, while lay women figure prominently in the list of presidents, women ministers are still under-represented on it.

Growing Together

The year after the formation of the Unitarian Women's Group, a resolution was passed at the denominational annual meetings, committing the General Assembly to set up 'a working party to consider the possible implications of feminist theology in connection with the thought and worship of our denomination'. The resulting report, Growing Together, a loose-leaf pack of essays, articles, and exercises, was published in 1984, the product of a collaborative effort of three women and three men (Celia Midgley, Ann Peart, Joy Croft, Arthur Long, Leonard Smith, and Peter Sampson). It covers a wide range of topics, for, as Joy Croft wrote in her introduction:

... the feminist vision is not analytical but holistic and relational by nature, seeking the common and unifying elements in all experience. Feminist theology, like Unitarianism, sets religion in the context of our whole lives. Therefore, our Report examines not only images of God and the language of worship but the relation of women and women's vision of the church and society as a whole.

'Women in Society', the first section, includes exercises to uncover sexist assumptions and bias in newspaper reporting, and an article by Sara Maitland asking 'Are women discriminated against? The question of sexist language is explored by means of various exercises, and guidelines are given for the use of more inclusive alternatives.

A paper on images of God explains why the gender of God can be significant, and gives examples of female images of God in the Bible, in medieval thought, and in the Unitarian tradition. Theodore Parker (1810-1860), the prominent American Unitarian minister, whose works were widely used in Britain, frequently addressed God as 'mother', as have more recent ministers and writers of prayers.

The section on the record of the British Unitarian movement leaves out a great deal, but gives a brief history of the Women's League; an account of women and ministry, with a list of women ministers; and papers on the relevance of radical dissent and the emancipation of women, and the Unitarian contribution to female emancipation, all topics to be considered in later parts of this chapter.

The report also covered some wider issues concerning women in society, including alienation and women, and women and peace, with explorations of power, anger, and humility. A final section on roles of women and men in the church looks at both Unitarian and mainstream situations, and suggests some exercises for uncovering hidden patterns of participation or lack of it.

This slim report, 15 years after its publication, is still the only significant British Unitarian work on feminist theology, and is often forgotten, though it is still in print and contains much material which is relevant and useful. At the time it was written, most people were ignorant of the rich but hidden tradition of women's activism within and on the edge of the Unitarian movement. Some people are now working to discover 'forgotten prophets' who tackled the 'woman question' in their own way and time. What follows is just a brief glimpse of some examples of this.

A tradition of women's involvement

The decentralized nature of Unitarian organization, with its ambivalent attitude to structures and authority, and its emphasis on freedom of individual thought and conscience, has allowed for a wide variation of response, both to the question of the status of women and to ideas of feminist theology. Clearly these two issues are closely related. The status of women within the movement and in society cannot logically be separated from a theology of which the 'critical principle ... is the promotion of the full humanity of women' (Ruether 1983, p18). However, Unitarian concern for the practical status of women dates from the late eighteenth century, when Unitarianism was first becoming organized as a distinct denomination, while feminist theology did not become a recognizable subject until the 1960s. Reflecting this chronology, I first explore Unitarian thoughts on the status of women, and secondly examine Unitarian contributions and attitudes to the varieties of feminist theology.

Unitarian women and society

Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the most prominent activist on behalf of women at the end of the eighteenth century, attended the dissenting chapel at Newington Green. She owed much to her friendship with rational dissenters (the forerunners of the Unitarians) such as Richard Price, minister of congregations at Newington Green and Hackney, Ann Jebb, Anna Barbauld, and Mrs Burgh (Tomalin 1974, pp46-52). Her friend and publisher, Joseph Johnson, was a prominent Unitarian, and her eventual husband, William Godwin, was for a time a Unitarian minister. Virginia Sapiro calls attention to this dissenting tradition:

> [Mary Wollstonecraft] called for extending the political analysis of the Dissenting radicals and their associates among the French beyond government institutions and public politics to the family and private politics. She was a consummate anti-patriarchal thinker in a way few better-known 'anti-patriarchal' thinkers have been or could ever understand. (Tomalin, 1974,p28)

Wollstonecraft's close friend **Mary Hays** also found her feminist voice through her rational dissenting associations, and contributed several works on women's rights. Her 'Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women' uses arguments from the Bible, in particular the egalitarian teaching of Jesus, to argue for women's equality with men. While Mary Hays and **Helen Maria Williams** joined Wollstonecraft in becoming too radical for the Unitarians of their day, other Unitarian women, such as **Catharine Cappe** and **Anna Barbauld**, who stayed within the movement, were also concerned with women's status and in particular worked to improve education for girls (Barbauld, 1781; Brooks, 1996; Cappe, 1822; Kelly, 1993; Pollin, 1971; Selvidge, 1996).

From the 1820s a significant number of women and men at the radical end of the Unitarian spectrum worked for women's rights on a variety of issues. **William Johnson Fox**, who was minister at South Place Chapel in London and editor of *The Monthly Repository,* wrote about the terrible position of women in loveless marriages and advocated easier divorce. Fox's own unsatisfactory marriage, which he left in order to live with a younger woman, Eliza Flower, is doubtless very relevant to his views (Gleadle, 1996). It was said of **James Stansfield**, lawyer and politician, that 'He did more than any other man in Europe to promote the educational and political advancement of the female sex, the opening to them of the medical profession and the triumph of several other movements peculiarly dear to them'(Spears 1906, p392). **Harriet Taylor Mill** not only influenced the writing of her second husband, John Stuart Mill, but wrote a considerable amount, including the radical tract, Enfranchisement of Women, published anonymously in 1851, in which she advocated not just votes for women, but the improvement of the whole status of women as necessary for the moral progress of humanity.

In the nineteenth century, as at the end of the twentieth century, Unitarians did not speak with one voice. The radicals advocated many reforms and worked towards the full equality of women, and their radicalism often took them out of conventional Unitarian circles. **Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Bessie Raynes Parkes** and the others members of the feminist Langham Place Group as well as socialists like **Catherine Barmby** grew up as Unitarians but rejected Unitarianism in later life. Other Unitarians worked for women's rights and managed to stay within the Unitarian fold. **Clementia Taylor** was one such woman; she worked for both female suffrage and education, as well as a host of other philanthropic concerns, while **Elizabeth Reid** founded Bedford College, the first higher-educational establishment for women run by women (Ruston, 1991; Levine, 1987).

Frances Power Cobbe was born into an upper-class Anglican family in Ireland, and became converted to the theistic strand of Unitarianism on reading works by Theodore Parker. She attended the Little Portland Street Chapel in London, and was friendlywith its minister, James Martineau, In the last years of her life she helped to found the Unitarian church at Aberystwyth. When she first came to England as an adult, she went to help **Mary Carpenter** with her work with delinquent girls in Bristol, before settling in London to earn her living as a journalist. She is considered the most able and prolific writer of the mid-Victorian feminists, and her ideas were very well known in the nineteenth century. The range of feminist issues on which she campaigned included education, suffrage, marital violence, celibacy, and women's health. She took issue with W.R. Greg, who argued that surplus single women should be sent to the colonies to marry. On the contrary, wrote Cobbe, single women should have full autonomy and be able to live independent and satisfying lives (Caine, 1992).

Unitarian women and the church

At the end of the eighteenth century, and well into the next century, the majority of Unitarians were anxious to be accepted by more orthodox church people as respectable Christians. Any behaviour which threatened this respectability, such as encouraging women to speak in church or preach, was therefore discouraged. If women were to play a significant part within Unitarianism, other than by supporting men, sewing, teaching, preparing food and giving money, ways had to be found of subverting the private roles that were expected of them, and of overcoming the requirement to be modest, respectable, and circumspect. These roles had become increasingly restrictive during the first half of the nineteenth century. Marlon Ross has explored this ambiguity, showing how women had the freedom of conscience essential to the Unitarian tradition, but were required to play the subordinate role expected in a patriarchal society. Thus women acquired a status of 'double dissent', challenging the expectations of both the Church of England and society in general (Ross 1994). The insights gained from this uncomfortable position are particularly valuable, and are similar to those developed in feminist standpoint theories.

However, in spite of the difficulties, Unitarian women did write discourses and sermons from early days. **Anna Barbauld**, the daughter of the principal of Warrington Academy, acquired an education in theology and classics deeper than most women's through access to her father's library, colleagues, and pupils. Her sermons were published in contemporary periodicals such as *The Monthly Repository*, but she was best known firstly as a poet and then as a writer of educational books for children. She was a pioneer of early reading books for little children, and probably had more influence than anyone else on several generations of Unitarians and others through her *Hymns in Prose for Children*, which was available in various editions in several languages for over 100 years. These pieces were designed to be learned by heart, and to inculcate a sense of the divine in all the daily experiences of children.

It was said that Mary Hays wrote some sermons for John Disney, minister of Essex Street (Unitarian) Chapel in the early years of the nineteenth century. Although there is no clear evidence for this, it is probable that her ideas were used, and that she helped to edit Disney's work for publication (Brooks, p9). Hays' use of scripture in promoting equal rights for women has already been mentioned; this must figure as one of the earliest ventures into feminist theology.

The full story of women's gradual acceptance as preachers and eventually as ministers has yet to be uncovered. It seems likely that women first spoke from Unitarian pulpits at secular meetings. When the Quaker, Lucretia Mott, came to England to attend the anti-slavery convention in 1840, she toured the country and spoke at several Unitarian churches (Tolles, 1952). One of the chapels where she spoke was that of the Carter Lane congregation in London, and it may have been with Mott in mind that Joseph Hunter wrote in 1845, 'Yet the charm methinks was a little broken when a woman was seen perched in the pulpit which had been graced by the presence of such venerable men' (quoted in Godfrey, 1984, p18). Later in the century Frances Power Cobbe a] so spoke in various churches, Unitarian and others. The obituary of **Mrs R.J. Jones** of Aberdare in The Inquirer of 1899 tells us not only of her considerable educational, philanthropic, and political activities, but goes onto recall that' When her husband was prevented from preaching, she often occupied the pulpit for him'. George Fox, in his manuscript account of his ministry at Mossley (1857-1865), writes:

From their connexion with Methodism, quite a number of people, both men and women, could pray and speak at meetings. At the 'free ministration meetings' which were sometimes held on Sunday evenings at the chapel, l was interested in listening to the devout prayers offered and religious addresses given by simple, uneducated persons. They had learnt much of the spirit of the Gospel. (Fox, 1910, p33)

It seems likely that a considerable number of women actually preached and led worship in Unitarian churches in the second half of the nineteenth century, event hough the evidence for this is not immediately accessible.

Our first direct knowledge of an ordained woman minister accepted by the Unitarians concerns **Caroline Soule**, an American who came to minister to the Glasgow Universalist Church in 1879, and preached and had pastoral oversight of the Dundee Unitarian Church during the absence of its minister in America (Hitchings, 1985, pp134-6). In the 1880s **Martha Turner**, who had been minister of the Melbourne Unitarian Church in Australia, preached in many English and Scottish churches (Gilley, in Croft, 1984).

After much vigorous persuasion, Frances Power Cobbe and **Anna Swanwick** were allowed to attend James Martineau's classes at Manchester College in the 1870s. Two American women ministry students attended in 1892, the same year in which Mrs Humphrey Ward was invited to lecture at the college. The first official woman student for the British Unitarian ministry was **Gertrude von Petzold**, who trained at Edinburgh, Manchester College Oxford, and Berlin before taking up her first ministry in Leicester in 1904. Although Mrs **T.B. Broadrick** appears on the roll of Unitarian ministers for 1907 at Lewin's Mead Domestic Mission in Bristol, and **Helen Louise Phillips** is listed for 1917 with ministries at a variety of places, it was not until 1915 that the next woman, **Margaret Crook**, was accepted for training at Manchester College. After this numbers rose, and eight women had trained for the ministry there by the end of 1927. The first woman to be accepted for training at the Unitarian College at Manchester was Rosamund Barker in 1928. Since then, apart from a lull in the 1940s and 1950s, there has been a steady increase in the number of women ministers in the British Unitarian movement, with very little overt prejudice experienced (Gilley in Croft 1984).

Although women were not recognized formally as ministers until the early years of this century, there were many other ways in which they could be of service and make their voices heard within the Unitarian movement. Women have always been prominent as teachers. Anna Barbauld's work in this field has already been mentioned; **Gertrude Martineau**, artist daughter of the theologian James Martineau, wrote Home Counsels, a delightful series of moral tales for children at the end of the nineteenth century, and there are many other instances which could be quoted. Even now, most religious education in the Unitarian movement is conducted by women.

One area of Unitarian work that was always done mainly by women was that of postal mission. The London Postal Mission, started in 1886 with the help of the Rev Robert Spears, was run by four women, **Lucy Tagart, Florence Hill, Miss Teschmacher** and **Mrs Gow**. It rapidly developed into a national organization, the 'Central Postal Mission and Unitarian Workers Union', not only spreading knowledge of Unitarianism but also providing communication between secretaries of other postal missions and workers in educational, benevolent and social fields, many of whom were women. Some of the earlier women ministers were prominent in the work of the mission, which also lent theological books, and eventually merged with the publicity department of the General Assembly of Unitarian Churches (Chancellor, n.d.).

Mention has been made of the Women's League, or, to give it its full title, The British League of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women. This began in 1907, largely due to the work of **Helen Brooke Herford**, who had experience of the Alliance of Unitarian Women in the USA. The objects of the League include both promoting Unitarianism and the religious life in Unitarian churches, and bringing Unitarian women into fellowship. Through its meetings women have gained the confidence and the expertise to hold offices within congregations and national societies. Although its work has included the traditional women's roles of fundraising and tea-making, its importance in training generations of women in running meetings and then congregations and other organizations has been crucial to the survival of the Unitarian movement (Mitchell, 1949).

Unitarian women as theologians

In her articles on 'Female Writers on Practical Divinity', published in *The Monthly Repository* in 1822, **Harriet Martineau**, who at that time was still a Unitarian, remarks that 'some of the finest and most useful English works on the subject of Practical Divinity are by female authors' (Martineau, 1822, p593). She goes on to discuss Hannah More, an evangelical, and Anna Barbauld, a Unitarian, deriving value from each. This emphasis on the practical aspects of religion, with a lack of regard for doctrine and for denominational boundaries, is typical of many Unitarian women.

Women's concern for religious education in its broadest sense illustrates this. A good number of Unitarian women were concerned about the religious and moral instruction of the young, and the education of women in the duties of running a suitably moral household and doing good in the wider world. One such example is a series of lectures by Frances Power Cobbe entitled *The Duties of Women*, published in 1881. She expounds firstly on personal duties, then on social duties resulting from relationship, as mothers, daughters, sisters, etc; from contract, as wives and friends; and as members of society and citizens of the state. Cobbe is known particularly for her work to challenge violence against women and cruelty to animals.

Although comparatively few women had sufficient classical and theological education to engage in doctrinal exposition or controversy, more felt able to write and collect devotional materials, hymns, prayers, reflections, even sermons. Mary Carpenter, Harriet Martineau, and Frances Power Cobbe all produced such works.

When women did concern themselves with doctrine, as did **Sara Hennell** and Frances Power Cobbe, it was often not out of an interest in doctrine for its own sake, but in order to promote ethical living and a devoutfaith. Hennell called one of her long theological works *Thoughts in Aid of Faith*, and explained that it was to be read, not in a spirit of competition with rival doctrines, but in order to strengthen individual religious faith. This preference for a life of faith and devotion over an interest in competing doctrines and philosophical analysis can be traced from the eighteenth century, in the works of Anna Barbauld, Mary Hays, and Catharine Cappe, right through the nineteenth century in the early writings of Harriet Martineau, and the works of Sara Hennell and Frances Power Cobbe, into the twentieth century. Many of the women ministers follow this tradition, notably **Ethel Kay**, who ministered at half a dozen churches and the Central Postal Mission, **Verona Conway**, minister at Lancaster who wrote much about peace issues, and **Margaret Barr**, who provided education and health care to the Unitarians in the Khasi Hills of North East India.

Unitarian women have tended to avoid disputations, and aspire to cooperation and sympathy with fellow seekers in the search for truth and justice. From Anna Barbauld onward, they distrusted an exclusive reliance on reason and the intellect, and emphasized the importance of cultivating religious and virtuous feelings. This is still apparent to this day.

Perhaps the most academically respected of contemporary Unitarian philosophers of religion is **Sharon Welch** in the United States. She has deliberately turned her back on doctrinal disputes, and contributes significantly in areas of ethics. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, published in 1990, is a notable contribution to feminist ethics, and her more recent articles on racial justice and democracy illustrate her practical interests. In Britain, Unitarian women are working on other issues of justice, notably homelessness and drug dependency (**Ann Latham**), Third World issues (**Clarice Nuttall**), and peace concerns (**Joy Croft, Jessamine Hoskins**). The Social Responsibility Department at Unitarian Headquarters is run by **Ingrid**

Tavkar, who has done much to raise awareness of social-justice matters within the Unitarian movement, besides contributing to one world work on an ecumenical scale.

Conclusion

When the work of Unitarian women of the past becomes more widely known, we present-day women will be proud to see that our own efforts for social justice come at the end of a long tradition of such work, and our foremothers will no longer be the forgotten prophets of the Unitarian movement.

Even if the names of many of the individual women are forgotten, the issues they raised are still alive today. There are three areas of particular concern.

- First is the theme of justice. Are we women accorded as much dignity and worth as men, and encouraged to attain our full potential in the Unitarian movement and in society at large? It may be that social convention as much as Unitarian tradition is a stumbling block here.
- Secondly, what is our concept of the divine, or that which is of ultimate concern? In most congregations God is still referred to more often as male than female, for example when the Lord's Prayer is said or sung, beginning with the invocation to 'Our Father'. Rarely is this counterbalanced with equal references to the divine as female, though gender-neutral terms are often used. While the divine is thought of as more male than female, women will have a lower status than men, and we will have more difficulty valuing ourselves as subjects (rather than objects).
- The third area of concern relates to different ways of doing theology, or even of being a Unitarian person. The traditional male ways of being a theologian or a minister reflect a masculine approach. More holistic, imaginative, and feminist methodologies have been developed, but are often dismissed as not proper theology, or not expected forms of ministry. More effort is needed to loosen the male monopoly over traditional ways of doing theology and ministry, so that the value of other approaches can be recognized.

Not all Unitarians will agree on either methods or conclusions. There is still a welcome variety of Unitarian perspectives on women and religion, ranging from the equal-rights feminism expounded by Mary Wollstonecraft to the more radical stance of Sharon Welch. Equal-rights feminists have assumed that all that women need is equal access to education and employment for them to gain equal standing in church and society. More radical feminists consider that women often prefer to do things differently from men, and that different insights and methodologies are necessary if women are to flourish, rather than be forced into the male mode. Such feminists would say that a 'level playing field' is not enough: the rules are man-made, and need to be changed drastically to enable women to play their full part. There is some evidence that Unitarians are working towards greater inclusivity, characterized by a preference for co-operation rather than competition, care over inclusive language, and a greater emphasis on active participation in religious education and worship. Margaret Crook's call for the re-shaping of our religious practices is finding a response.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why is women and religion considered a suitable topic for discussion, but not men and religion?

2. Mary Daly said that when God is male, man is God. Luce Irigaray writes of the importance of finding a female image of the divine so that women can see themselves as becoming fully human. To what extent do you agree with these statements?

3. Think about who plays which roles in your congregation. Include making the tea, collecting, counting and spending money, chairing committees, leading worship, and so on. Is there any difference between the participation of men and of women? If there is, why is this so?

4. Look at histories of your denomination or congregation; do they tell how women as well as men shaped the movement?

5. Women have often been concerned more with the practice of religion than with doctrine. Is this a valid distinction? If so, which side do you consider most important, and why?

6. Why are there still comparatively few women theologians and ministers?

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Unitarian perspectives on Jesus

Margaret Wilkins

A year or so ago, on a visit to a Unitarian church in the north of England, I went after the service to look at the bookshelves which held its library. Two books in particular caught my eye. Neither would have been a likely candidate for the bookshelf of a mainstream church. One was *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived*, the Jehovah's Witnesses' soberly scriptural account of the life of Jesus, the Son of God who gave his life as a ransom sacrifice for humanity; the other was Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man*, a lively and splendidly improbable account of the life of Jesus which attributes to him two marriages (the first to Mary Magdalene), and three children, as well as claiming that he travelled secretly to Rome with Paul on the journey recorded in the last chapters of Acts and eventually died there. They were books at opposite ends of the enormously broad spectrum of books about Jesus; the one and only thing that they had in common was that both shared the Unitarian understanding of Jesus as fully human and not God.

So what do Unitarians today make of Jesus? There are probably as many perspectives on Jesus as there are Unitarians. As this essay will inevitably reflect my own prejudices, I should declare them before I begin. I am an escaped liberal Anglican who joined a Unitarian congregation not so long ago, because I found myself much more accepted there than I had been in the parish churches where I had worshipped before. I certainly cannot claim to be an entirely typical Unitarian — but then I doubt that such a being exists! My other relevant peculiarity is that my degree was in classics and so I have an abiding interest in the Graeco-Roman world in which Christianity was formed, an interest which colours my approach to Jesus in his historical setting. This essay reflects the point of view of one Unitarian in the United Kingdom — or perhaps I should be even more exact and say England — far from representative of the whole of the worldwide Unitarian movement in all its diversity.

When I first came into contact with Unitarianism, one of the things that I found most attractive was its claim to concentrate on 'the teaching of Jesus rather than teaching about Jesus'. I had recently been attending a church where we sang choruses whose enthusiasm for Jesus was matched only by their extreme theological woolliness. I was glad to find what at first I felt was a decent reticence about him in the Unitarian churches I attended; but l have come to wonder since if what I thought was reticence is in fact much of the time an awkward silence. Perhaps one half or more of British Unitarians define themselves as Christians, and, for a large proportion of those who do not, Jesus presumably is significant as one of the world's great religious teachers, and the one whose nominal followers have formed the Western civilization in which we live. Scholars, popular writers, and liberal mainstream Christians all seem to have a great deal to say about Jesus, much of it not very welcome to the conservative, while contemporary Unitarianism has contributed very little to the discussion. Jesus is certainly present in the Unitarian movement today, but it is hard to escape the feeling that for many Unitarians he is a shadowy and unexamined figure.

The elusive Jesus

About a year before I started writing this essay, I had committed myself to reading the New Testament through in the original Greek. I wanted to get behind the familiarity of the English words I had heard all my life and see what happened as I read; so I approached the text with a mind as open as I could manage and found (a little to my surprise) that what principally emerged for me as I worked my way through the gospels was a powerful impression of the Jewishness of Jesus, a teacher in an almost exclusively Jewish setting whose contacts with outsiders were rare and nearly always less than comfortable. I liked Jesus' reported attitude towards women, which seemed far more accepting and respectful than that of many of his contemporaries, but I felt uneasy at what struck me as a modern reader as the racism shown in his remarks to the woman whom Matthew (15: 21-8) describes as Canaanite and Mark (7: 24-30) as Syrophoenician. At all events, she was plainly not Jewish, and Jesus' apparently contemptuous remark about giving the bread meant for children to dogs when she first asked him to heal her daughter seems to me unpleasant, even though he relented when she answered him back.

Of course, I was not seeing Jesus as his contemporaries did, despite my desire to get as close to the original as possible. Quite apart from questions about the reliability of the gospels as a historical record, and the fact that a translator had already come between me and Jesus, putting his Aramaic into Greek, I was doing what every reader has done since the late first century: bringing my own preoccupations and prejudices with me. The cultural background of the world in which Jesus and his first followers lived was in some ways so like our own, diverse and eclectic, that we can easily lose sight of how deeply different it was and how impossible to reconstruct fully. Jesus' Judaism was that of a time before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the eventual codification of the oral law that led to the development of the Judaism we know today. In fact some scholars prefer to speak of 'Judaisms' in the plural when they consider this period.

Most of the movements that flourished at the time have left few reliable traces; there are only two groups for which significant amounts of contemporary or near-contemporary evidence survive. One is the group based in the desert at Qumran who produced the library we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls and for whom we have rich archaeological and literary evidence, even if it is not always easy to interpret. The other is the group that formed around Jesus and his first followers, for which no contemporary archaelogical evidence survives after the devastation of the Jewish War which culminated in the sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Such fragments as remain from that period cannot be attributed to Jesus and the earliest Christians save by an act of pious fantasy, but we do have a body of literature beginning from about 50CE, much of which includes earlier oral material. Apart from the New Testament, too, there are a few glimpses of Jesus and the first Christians in other sources; Jesus is described in the Antiquities of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus in a passage which has probably been either doctored or entirely faked by a later Christian editor, but he is also referred to in passing in an account of the killing of his brother James as 'Jesus called the Christ'. The Roman historian Tacitus refers briefly to his death in Judea under Pilate, as well as to the persecution of his followers by Nero, and there is another possible reference in the history of Suetonius.

It was the misfortune — at least from the Unitarian point of view — of Christianity to be established in a particular time and place, when Jesus' early followers had to defend their position first against fellow Jews and then against very articulate and entirely unimpressed followers of other religious and philosophical movements in the wider world. Paul's rather bruising encounters with the Athenians when he tried to explain his faith to them, described in Acts 17:16-34, were the forerunners of many such debates. The level of skill and sophistication required to deal with the objections of well-educated and sceptical outsiders led to the accumulation ofa body of apologetic in which the original material about Jesus and the beliefs which had formed around him gradually solidified into a fixed body of teaching, which led to the formation Of tile canon of tile New Testament as we now have it and the creeds of what became the mainstream church. Divergent views were pushed to the margins.

There were other traditions that were gradually excluded and have not survived, of which we have only a few literary fragments. Other groups, including the Gnostics, who claimed to have secret knowledge not shared with the church at large, came to be defined as heretical, and their Jesus, the Jesus who did not blink, whose feet did not touch the ground and who only seemed to be crucified, the preacher of hidden doctrines to a chosen few, the leader of the mysterious round dance of the disciples, disappeared from view - at least until recently, as we shall see. The centralizing, standardizing force exerted by the Church under pressure, both intellectually and also physically during periods of persecution, and the need fora cohesive body of doctrine to ensure survival when leaders were killed or exiled, entailed a loss of the imaginative, affective element of Christianity, which lingered on in marginalized groups. Instead mainstream Christianity developed precise doctrines and carefully ordered liturgical worship; and at the same time it developed the endless concerns about heresy, about getting its theological definitions exactly right, which still bedevil it. No other major religion has developed such a cumbersome weight of theology and such an emphasis on exactness of belief.

For 1500 years most of the Christian world has lived with the theological definitions of the fourth century, the result of the collision of the strict monotheism of Judaism with the religious pluralism of the Graeco-Roman world, where the human and the divine could slip quite easily into each anotherand where an emperor era hero or a philosopher might be called a god with no awkwardness at all. The very clear dividing line between God and creation which it had inherited from its lewish roots gave the early Church endless trou ble as it sought to define Jesus as the one being who straddled the divide, the one who in some incomprehensible manner was both fully human and fully divine. It is a tribute to the thoroughness of their work that it was only the most radical of the sixteenth-century reformers who eventually questioned the definitions they had inherited.

From the eighteenth century onwards, with the rise of the Romantic movement and its emphasis on feeling and emotion, many Western Christians began to feel the need fora more accessible, more truly human and comprehansive Jesus. Liberal Protestantism, with its emphasis on rason and humanity, provided the setting for the rise of the historical Jesus. Theligians and historians began to make attempts to build something that made sense to readers of their own times out of the first-century records and embarked on what became the search for the Jesus of history rather than the Christ of faith. The search has gone through successive phases, first the sentimental or sceptical accounts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating in The Quest of the Historical Jesus by Schweitzer (first published in German in 1906), whose view of Jesus as mistaken prophet of the apocalypse so shocked his contemporaries. Next came a period when critical analysis of the gospels seemed a more profitable area of study than the attempt to reconstruct a Jesus lost in the mists of history; and then from the middle of the century a renewed attempt to see Jesus in his historical context. Scholars such as Geza Vermes in *Jesus the Jew* (l973) have sought to locate Jesus in his Jewish setting to ee what information that yields about him. They ask why he did what he did, what his aims were, and how hecan be understood interms of his own situation. Critical scholarship has thrown new light on many areas, sometimes in a way that may seem to a casual reader to distance Jesus even more and to reduce the familiar stories to fragments. It examines how earlier written and oral material may have been recycled to fit the needs of the individual gospel writers (or editors); it seems now, for example, that at least some of the material in the gospels, such as Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees, reflects tile situation of early Christians rather than dating back to the career of Jesus himself.

Recent research has also cast light on the form and purpose of the gospels as a whole. In *What are the Gospels?*. Richard Burridge suggests that they are quite typical examples of a classical genre, *bios*, roughly equivalent to modern biography though lacking its objectivity, which was used for recounting the lives of such people as philosophers and politicians. Since the gospel accounts are sometimes criticized for over-emphasizing the suffering and death of Jesus, it is interesting to note that there is frequent concentration on the last days and deaths of other subjects of classical hips. According to this view, the gospels were designed not just to preserve the teaching and acts of Jesus for the early Church, but to attract outsiders by using a literary form familiar to educated readers.

The Unitarian Jesus

The alarming precision of the statements about Jesus in the creeds, which Unitarians find so uncomfortable, is quite foreign to the spirit of the earliest Christian documents. Before the painfully achieved theological consensus of the fourth and fifth centuries, writers of the first two Christian centuries found imaginative ways of describing how they experienced the action of the divine in their lives. Early writers are relaxed and sometimes almost playful in their use of the names 'God', 'Jesus', and 'Spirit', and the boundaries between what later orthodoxy labelled as the three persons of the Godhead are fluid. Hermas, a writer of the second century, in his strange allegorical work *The Shepherd*, seems at one point to equate the Son with the Spirit. The first use of the Greek word *trias* (trinity) as a theological term does not occur until shortly before the end of the second century, and even then it was not used in the almost mathematical sense of designating three equal persons that it eventually acquired. The concepts of Father, Son, and Spirit were used in different contexts and different permutations. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (who probably came from a pagan background and who incidentally spoke of Jesus as God), writing at the beginning of the second century, uses the three together in a striking metaphor '... seeing that you are as stones of the temple of the Father, made ready for the building of God our Father, carried up to the heights by the engine of Jesus Christ, that is the cross, and using as a rope the Holy Spirit' (Letter to the Ephesians, IX. 1).

It could be said that it was largely discomfort about the nature of Jesus that precipitated the Unitarian movements of the sixteenth century and subsequently. They noticed the gap between what they saw when they read the scriptures and what was accepted as orthodoxy, and they could not pretend that it did not exist. The most radical thinkers of the Reformation were not content to stop at the compromise position that mainstream Protestantism has occupied and still largely occupies, at least officially. They wrestled with what they read in their Bibles, and as they did so the theological compromises of the ancient world were unravelled.

The Spaniard Michael Servetus, despite his close connections with many of the early Protestant reformers who stayed within orthodoxy, found that his understanding of the Bible led him to reject the doctrine of the Trinity, and he was eventually burned for his beliefs in Calvin's Geneva. For the Italian Socinus, a little later in the sixteenth century, Jesus was straightforwardly a human being, though one who was without sin and who was uniquely used by God. His life was an example to humanity, and his resurrection and eternal glory a reward for his faithfulness; Christians might still pray to this exalted Jesus. Francis David and his followers in Transylvania departed even further from the traditional view of Jesus, seeing him as someone whose work was at an end and who was not to be regarded in any way as an object of worship. The Unitarian communities of central Europe flourished only briefly before suffering as a result of the Catholic renewal that followed the Counter-Reformation, and of the original churches only that in Transylvania has survived to the present day.

Meanwhile in England the civil and religious upheavals of the middle of the seventeenth century threw up theological radicals of all sorts. Some of these were influenced by Socinianism and later by Arianism, which revived an older understanding of Jesus, condemned in the fourth century, that he was not eternally begotten but instead a being created by God, who gave him the title Son of God as a reward for his righteousness. In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were a number of Arians in the established church as well as in dissenting congregations that were Unitarian in belief if not in name. The

Unitarian Tracts of the 1690s were in fact produced by Anglicans, and some eighty years later it was the Anglican clergyman Theophilus Lindsey who opened the first explicitly Unitarian place of worship. The visible Unitarianism of the eighteenth century was very much a religion of the theologically trained and well educated, for whom a strictly human though uncommonly virtuous Jesus posed no problem. While Wesley and other evangelicals were preaching a Christianity of ardent devotion to a saving Jesus, Unitarianism was a religion for the rational and enlightened.

The same rational approach marked the development of Unitarianism on the other side of the Atlantic. Thomas Jefferson was greatly influenced by the British Unitarian Joseph Priestley, for whom Jesus was entirely human, and in 1820 he produced his tellingly named *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a harmony of the four gospels stripped of all miraculous content and concentrating on the teaching of Jesus. Despite Jesus' short career and the superstitious elements introduced by those who recorded it, Jefferson believed that in the gospels 'a system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he [Jesus] left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.'

The British and American Unitarians of the nineteenth century, on the whole, developed an understanding of Jesus not too far out of line with the rest of liberal Protestantism. While for them Jesus was a human being, he was one whose character and teachings were of such a lofty nature that he might be regarded as unique. Though a few American Unitarians had ceased to think of themselves as Christian in any sense by the 1860s, the majority on both sides of the Atlantic had no doubt that as followers of the teachings of Jesus they had every right to the name. Unitarian Christianity gradually moved from its original dependence on scripture to a position where belief must be supported by reason; it offered a faith at once reasonable and optimistic, whose high regard for the human Jesus suggested hope for the rest of humanity. 'The unexampled spectacle of such "grace and truth"', said James Martineau (1890, p.449), 'of heavenly sanctity penetrating all human experiences, startles and wins hearts that never were so drawn before, and wakes in them a capacity for that which they reverence in another. This attraction of affinity there could not be, were there not divine possibilities secreted and a divine persuasion pleading in each soul.'

Unitarians were naturally not immune from the debate about the historical Jesus brought to a head by Schweitzer (who later in his life identified himself as a Unitarian). In 1909 the *Hibbert Journal* Supplement *Jesus or Christ*? brought together contributors drawn from a variety of denominations and points of view. Yet in the same year an essayist in *The Place of Jesus in Modern Religion*, published by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, can still speak of Jesus in the most traditional Unitarian way, claiming, 'we are critically justified in recognizing a figure unique in moral integrity and spiritual grace, a being of a benignity and a dignity, and withal a commanding manliness, to which it would be hard to find a parallel in all the stores of history' (Armstrong, 1909, pp19-20). Even years later, H. Harrold Johnson's *A Short Life of Jesus*, published in the Lindsey Press's series 'Religion: its Modern Needs and Problems' in 1933, is a loving and equally traditional account, long on the teachings and short on the miracles, of the Jesus of the gospels.

Not all Unitarian thought stayed in such strictly Unitarian grooves. L.A. Garrard's Essex Hall Lecture of 1956, *The Historical Jesus*, sought to reassess the impact on liberal Protestantism of Schweitzer fifty years after the publication of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and shared contemporary stirrings of hope that after all there were ways of retrieving useful knowledge about Jesus. The Unitarian contributors to *Concerning Jesus*, published in 1975, looked at their subject from a variety of perspectives, both Unitarian and non-Unitarian. But after that there has been nothing more, apart from the leaflet *Unitarian Views of Jesus*, published in 1992, whose writers affirm the value of a human Jesus but have little space to develop their thoughts.

It seems that, while there has been an explosion of books about Jesus and his times, both academic and popular, since the 1970s, Unitarians have gone very quiet. Much of the serious writing being produced today is sympathetic to long-established Unitarian views; so why are there so few Unitarian contributions? Is there no longer a need for Unitarians to put their views across as distinctive, or have the rise of the charismatic movement and the current success of evangelical Christianity helped to deter Unitarians from public discussion of the Jesus who is so noisily proclaimed there? Or are Unitarians simply content to stay with their inherited Jesus without taking account of new insights?

Can we risk a truly human Jesus?

There are real difficulties in the Unitarian conception of Jesus as fully human. While Unitarians need not be hampered by a belief in original sin, they are usually realistic enough to accept that even the best human beings are deeply flawed. Before her death, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was popularly regarded as a living saint, and the Catholic church is said to be preparing to canonize her with unusual speed; yet serious questions have been raised over the running of her homes for the dying and over the wisdom of some of her political connections. The almost universally revered Dalai Lama has been criticized by some Buddhists for suppressing the religious freedom of a minority group of Tibetan Buddhists. Yet there has been little critical thought among Unitarians about the possible implications of the real humanity of Jesus.

It would be unfair to say that there has been none. At the end of the eighteenth century Priestley realized the problem: 'It appears to me that we lose more than we gain, by contending for absolute perfection of character in Christ.... If he was so perfect, it is impossible not to conclude that notwithstanding his appearance "in fashion as a man", he was, in reality, something more than a man' (quoted in Wigmore-Beddoes 1975, p36). Martineau's friend Francis Newman, five years after he became a Unitarian, was much less circumspect, claiming that'... the character of Jesus ... abounds with manifest and grievous blots' and forthrightly describing him as 'one whose good behaviour was lower than the average' (ibid, p47).

Despite the fact that so many liberal Christians paint a glowing picture of Jesus as the perfect (or at least almost perfect) human being, it is obvious from some of the material preserved in the gospels that Jesus was surrounded by people who not only opposed him on religious grounds, but also disapproved of his behaviour. Contemporary critics complained that he was a glutton and drunkard, though not surprisingly the gospel writers have not included any reports of rowdy behaviour by Jesus; all we see in the accounts that have come down to us is a sober Jesus at respectable dinner parties (for example as the guest of a Pharisee in Luke 7: 36-50). Some passages suggest that he did not always get on well with his family, as when he dismissed a report that his mother and brothers were trying to see him with the remark that his disciples were his mother and brothers (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8; 19-21). On one occasion he was reportedly irritable enough to curse a fig tree that gave him no fruit when he was hungry (Matthew 21:18-19; Mark 11:13-15).

Is it possible that Jesus, as a great spiritual teacher, may have caused deep hurt to people as well as helping them? Biographies of saints reveal their mistakes and miscalculations and blind spots. Jesus plainly had his, too, but all we have to go on now area few reported incidents, already censored by the gospel writers. Perhaps we should consider the gospels as a sort of flattened biography, whose rough edges and angularities have been carefully smoothed by the respect of writers of a later generation for their subject. Some traces remain of an individual with real emotions, who is described as weeping at a friend's tomb, and but there seems little sense of a rounded human personality, someone with faults and eccentricities like the rest of us. If we see him as truly human, what do we do with the claim that he was without sin; and is a human Jesus necessarily a flawed Jesus?

While I was writing this essay I read a biography, written by a non-Mormon scholar, of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Before that I had only read official versions of his life in material published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Like many other innovative religious leaders, like Jesus himself (though neither Mormons nor, I imagine, most Unitarians would be happy if the parallels were pushed too far), he aroused strong emotions in his contemporaries. Accounts of his public preaching, for example, disagree to the point where it is almost impossible to believe that friends and enemies are talking about the same man. Here is a religious movement that started in 1830 in the United States, in an age and in a country where a free press and unfettered and frequently scurrilous comment flourished and where eye witnesses wrote copious letters and diaries, many of which have survived to this day. A huge amount of material about Smith, both admiring and abusive, a little of it even reasonably impartial, has come down to us, and despite all the contradictions a real if enigmatic person emerges from the records. In fact the biographer's account of Smith, with all his faults and mistakes, is certainly more interesting, and more appealing to an outsider, than the official hagiography of the Mormons. (Interestingly, liberal Mormon historians seem to attract the same kind of dislike from conservative Mormons that serious researchers of the early Church attract from conservative mainstream Christians.)

What might we find if we had such a wealth of contemporary material about Jesus? Would it have made him easier to understand, and more appealing to Unitarians and others? To some extent many of us operate a kind of self-censorship that prevents us from taking too much notice of the passages where Jesus seems to be harsh or unreasonable; but, if we knew more of his life, perhaps there would come a point where we had to consider him in a new light,

Retrieving or recreating Jesus?

Many Unitarians will continue to see Jesus, as Arthur Long described him recently, 'as the supreme example of the way in which God, the Eternal Spirit of love and power, operates through human lives, revealing himself above all in the great Prophet-Souls of all ages' (Long 1997, p23). The Unitarian Jesus is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the Jesus of the parables, the Jesus who welcomed children, the practical, loving Jesus who has inspired generations of Unitarians to involve themselves in all kinds of service to the communities in which they live.

However, anyone looking for different models of Jesus certainly has plenty to choose from, from the sober to the fantastic. Parallel with the academic study of Jesus and his background has been the rise of what might be called the novelty Jesus, who can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the influence of ideas from Eastern religions brought to the West by such movements as Theosophy. Increasing knowledge of the religious traditions of other cultures could lead to a certain dissatisfaction with one's own, and a desire to appropriate attractive fragments from others. Eclectic Christians found the perfect opportunity in the 'bidden' years of Jesus's life; they could fill his adolescence and twenties with improbable but educational travels and have him, for example, studying in a Tibetan monastery. The most comprehensive account of them all, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, makes Jesus do something of a Grand Tour through India, Tibet, Persia, Assyria, Greece and Egypt, teaching and debating with an assortment of spiritual masters, before at last coming home to start his ministry.

In this century Jesus is still someone who exercises a remarkable fascination, and not just for Christians. The production of books about him, from the scholarly to the sensational, shows no sign of slowing down. Some of the Jesuses they offer annoy mainstream Christians hugely. Some of them are perhaps not very likely to appeal to the majority of Unitarians, either: there is Jesus as magician, as revolutionary, as rabbi, as wandering Buddhist teacher, as vegetarian, as space alien, and apparently (coming soon) Jesus as Druid. Some writers argue that Jesus was gay, others that he was married. There is the Rosicrucian Jesus as the teacher of mysteries, later lost by the Church but preserved through the centuries by dedicated disciples; and the cosmic Christ of much New Age thinking.

The imaginative use of the Dead Sea Scrolls has produced a further crop of Jesuses: we have everything now from Jesus as nothing more than a personification of the concept of salvation to Jesus as Wicked Priest. The human Jesus is claimed to be buried in Kashmir or in the south of France. He spent his youth studying with a mysterious group of Buddhists in Egypt, and then returned to Palestine to teach what is really Buddhism. In this Buddhist version of Jesus, and probably in others too, there is a grain of something much more interesting than speculation about his movements: there is actually a good case to be made out for Buddhist or other Indian influences filtering into early Christianity by way of the Roman empire's Eastern trade routes. Unfortunately the sort of serious research required for the investigation of such possible connections is not exciting enough to sell popular books!

Is there room for a reappraisal of Jesus in Unitarianism? Unitarians maybe pleased that his humanity, even in some rather unlikely situations, is now so widely accepted. They may even find at least some of his miracles less troubling these days. Now that spiritual healing has become respectable enough as an alternative therapy to be employed in some National Health Service hospitals and doctors' surgeries, and even practised on the England football team, it may be possible for some Unitarians to accept Jesus as a particularly gifted spiritual healer. (When I was researching this essay I was delighted to find that this suggestion had already been made by an American Unitarian, Clayton R. Bowen, in an essay in Freedom and Truth, published as long ago as 1925.)

Of course, Jesus is not owned only by Christians. We may be able to learn new ways of seeing him from other faiths. To Muslims he is a prophet (and we find traces in the gospels of the possibility that some of his Jewish contemporaries regarded him thus). To many Hindus he is an inspired teacher, as he was to Gandhi, or a yogi or an avatar. Some Buddhists understand him as a Bodhisattva, a being who postpones his or her own liberation indefinitely for the sake of all other sentient beings. Within Unitarianism itself there are now many other possible ways of understanding him, floated by Unitarians who are also followers of other paths, for example devotees of Sai Baba, many of whom see Jesus, as they see Sai Baba himself, as an avatar, a manifestation of the divine in human form.

On the other hand, now that we are in a position to compare him with other great teachers and leaders both of the East and the West, especially perhaps the former, we may feel that there is something lacking in Jesus. His apparent lack of empathy with non-human creatures, for instance, may strike many modern Unitarians and others as a flaw in his character. Then there is the recovery of the feminine aspect of divinity, which for some reduces the appeal of a male religious teacher, all the more so when the religion that bears his name has been (and still largely is) in the hands of male leaders for nearly two thousand years. Creation spirituality and neo-paganism, with their emphasis on nature rather than on revelation, focus not on a single human figure, but on humanity as one small part of all that exists.

For many people outside the mainstream Christian churches, Jesus has increasingly become a figure on whom to project their own religious beliefs, or their fantasies. It could be said that Unitarians, too, have historically done the same, more so even than other Protestant traditions; they have taken the indistinct and sometimes contradictory figure of the New Testament and projected on to it the image of a glorious and larger than-life human being, a heroic figure and yet one who is close enough to us to be imitated, even if imperfectly, rather than Worshipped. Jesus as friend, as leader, as example, as teacher, as elder brother has stood Unitarians in good stead for generations and has inspired great numbers of them to model their lives on what they understand him to be; and it seems likely that this Jesus will continue to be at the centre of the faith of very large numbers of British Unitarians. But outside the churches the traditional image of Jesus increasingly faces competition from other, less reverential or at least less conventional presentations of his life and character. Will these seep into popular Unitarianism, and will the Jesus, or Jesuses, of Unitarians in the twenty-first century still be the same Jesus as the one who has inspired so many in the past?

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Questions for discussion

1. How do you see the role of Jesus in Unitarianism developing over the next quarter of a century?
2. In the light of current interest in the paranormal, do you think it is possible today to accept some of the miracles attributed to Jesus?
3. How far is it legitimate for a modern reader to use his or her imagination in seeking to understand the life and teaching of Jesus?
4. Is it possible for a Unitarian to feel that he or she has a relationship of any sort with Jesus?
5. Can Unitarianism ever detach itself completely from the figure of Jesus?
6. Is pious fantasy always a bad thing?

The author

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Unitarians, New Religions, and the New Age

George D. Chryssides

In 1991 the sons of two prominent British Unitarians went to Africa. There they became involved with a religious group that is little known in the West, and even less understood: the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star. Instead of contacting one of several anti-cult groups that claim to offer support to parents, Jeremy Goring and his wife Rosemary decided to visit their sons in Africa and discover Brotherhood for themselves.

What they found was a community led by Olumba Olumba Olu, whom Brotherhood members regard as the authoritative prophet for our times. Olumba teaches from the Christian Bible, which is accepted literally, and is believed to speak prophetically about the present age, which signals the imminent end of affairs on earth. Brotherhood is unusual in teaching that men and women do not lead one life, but are reincarnated many times and in various life-forms. Members live in a commune, committing them selves to peace and love. They observe the traditional events in the Christian calendar, such as Christmas and Easter, and, being a spirit-filled and spirit-moved organisation, place particular emphasis on Pentecost. In addition to the usual Christian festivals, Brotherhood institutes brief periods of fasting, including 'dry fasting', which entails going for up to three days without drink as well as food.

It may seem surprising to many, and particularly to Unitarians, that the Gorings were very favourably impressed by what they found in the community. They decided not only not to dissuade their sons from remaining, but themselves to join Brotherhood. Subsequently Olumba honoured Jeremy Goring by making him a 'bishop' in the community.

Feelings among Unitarians ran high. There was a considerable volume of correspondence in *The Inquirer*, the denomination's official journal, and the affair reached such proportions that it became the subject of debate at the UK General Assembly in 1994, where a resolution was passed prohibiting any Unitarian minister from jointly exercising a leadership role within any other religious organisation. Although the resolution did not mention either Jeremy Goring or the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, the question of how to deal with the Cross and Star controversy prompted the debate and loomed large in the discussion.

As a supporter of 'liberal religion', who is uncomfortable with assigning final authority to any book, leader or revelation, I have to express surprise that the Gorings found themselves drawn to a movement such as Brotherhood, which seems to advocate so many of the things that Unitarianism rejects. Yet the Brotherhood controversy highlighted a genuine problem for Unitarians who espouse the three-fold principle, first formulated by E.M. Wilbur, of 'freedom, reason, and tolerance'. What should one's attitude be when the principles of reason and tolerance conflict? Should Unitarians be happy to tolerate beliefs or practices that seem to them unreasonable, such as exuberant forms of religion which appeal to the emotions rather than to the intellect, and which purport to offer certainties and final authorities? The principle of tolerance is said to imply the freedom to explore one's own religious position, but what if that exploration leads the seeker into biblical literalism, spirit-filled spontaneity, or exclusive forms of religion which claim that all other religious seekers—including Unitarians—have got it badly wrong?

New Religious Movements: some definitions

'Cults' and 'new religions' are somewhat nebulous concepts. Different scholars use somewhat different definitions: thus, Peter Clarke regards a New Religious Movement (NRM) as a religious movement that has originated in the West after the Second World War; James Beckford takes the 1950s as the period in which such movements gained momentum; while Eileen Barker regards NRMs as having arisen from the 1960s onwards (Barker, 1990; Beckford, 1985; Clarke, 1987). Such disagreements are not concerned with points of fact, but are largely matters of convenience, and, more importantly, means of devising definitions that do not merely reflect our arbitrary preferences. The word 'cult' is often used in a pejorative way, and not only can pre-empt cool objective discussion of the phenomenon, but is strongly disliked by followers of new religions.

The substantive facts about the rise of new religions are fairly clear. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a number of minority religious groups were in evidence in the English-speaking world, principally The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Christadelphians, Christian Science, and Spiritualism, together with a handful of groups that have now virtually died out, such as British Israel.

Essentially, the older NRMs were much more staid in their lifestyles and in their evangelizing than the post-war ones. Only relatively minor adjustments were needed to one's way of life in order to become a Mormon, a Christian Scientist, or a Jehovah's Witness. Giving up alcohol, or refusing certain forms of medical treatment were still thoroughly compatible with maintaining one's family life and pursuing one's previous occupation prior to conversion. In their door-to-door missionary work, Mormons and Witnesses tended to engage in dialogue with householders rather than with younger family members for obvious reasons, and parents rather than children were typically the first to convert within a household.

The new religions that entered Britain from the late 1960s onwards had a markedly different character. Only a proportion of them were 'New Christian' in character. Groups making their impact on Britain were now as diverse as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Nichiren Shoshu (now Soka Gakkai International), Transcendental Meditation, and the Church of Scientology. The diverse character of the newer NRMs meant that the old style of Christian critique was no longer appropriate, since only a fraction of them could be construed as 'pseudo-Christian' impostors. Further, the early 1960s witnessed a dramatic decline in mainstream Christian allegiance, and hence fewer people found relevance in a distinctively Christian critique of 'the cults'. If ’ the cults' were 'a problem', they were as much a problem for non-Christians as for Christians.

The 1970s, however, saw a new wave of NRMs. The beatniks of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s were in decline, and some members of this youth counter-culture were seeking new forms of spirituality. Increased global communication had made new forms of religion widely accessible. Some combined Christianity with foreign religious ideas (for example, the Unification Church), while others introduced forms of religion that originated outside the Christian tradition, such as teachings from Indian gurus or from various forms of Buddhism.

The general public found some features of the new NRMs threatening. Several groups had taken to street evangelism rather than relying on responses at people's doors. All who ventured outside their homes were therefore potential targets for conversion, and young people as well as older ones were becoming 'recruited'. Eileen Barker reports that the average age of the full-time member of the Unification Church in 1989 was 23 — indicating a radically different target population from the householders who were sought by Mormons and Witnesses (Barker, 1990, p15).

The remarkable drop in the age of conversion was facilitated by a further feature of several groups: community living. The Unification Church, the Children of God (now The Family), and ISKCON offered a radical change of lifestyle, which in general could be adopted only by younger members of society who had fewer ties. The 'loss' of people's children to NRMs, coupled with the radically different lifestyle that they appeared to demand, added fuel to public opposition.

Methods of proselytizing appeared to be more aggressive too. Not only did the public streets afford no door for the potential convert to shut; evangelization tactics were believed to include deception regarding the group's identity, and techniques such as 'love bombing' and ‘flirty fishing' (enticement by sexual encounter). In the case of the Church of Scientology, enquirers were drawn into progressive engagement in Dianetics courses, for which they were required to pay, either by being persuaded to part with additional money, or by working as full-time staff members, offering labour in lieu of payment.

The unfamiliarity of these immigrant religions' ideas often prompted comments that they were 'bizarre' and 'irrational' (Broadbent, 1982). It therefore followed for most people that there could be no good reasons for accepting them, and maybe not even bad ones. Since rational persuasion could not inculcate belief in the messiahship of Sun Myung Moon, or in

Lord Krishna as the supreme personality of godhead, then — it was maintained — there must be some non-rational process at work that brought the seeker to faith. The’ brainwashing' theory was born.

Unitarians and new religions

It is no doubt because new religious movements typically seem so much at variance with the ideals of Unitarianism that the denomination has had little to say about them. However, in 1932 the Lindsey Press published a slim volume entitled *Some Religious Cults and Movements of To-day*, in a series 'Religion: Its Modern Needs and Problems', written by Herbert Crabtree. Crabtree's use of the word 'cults' in this context is interesting. This word tended to catch on in the 1970s, before which it was a term used by sociologists, to describe either a loosely organized movement that focused on a charismatic leader or celestial being ('the cult of Amitabha' in Buddhism) or a movement that lay outside the dominant culture, not being a 'sect' of Christianity (as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christadelphians appear to be).

Crabtree considered only three prominent 'cults': Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism. Interestingly, he had nothing whatsoever to say about Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christadelphians, the Brethren, or any other 'New Christian' group. It should be remembered, however, that, at the time when Crabtree was writing, neither the Mormons nor the Witnesses were as much in evidence as they are now. Although the Mormon Church arrived in Britain in 1837, its British membership had reached only 6,491 by 1930, and was actually in slight decline; its major expansion did not begin until the 1950s (LDS, 1998). As far as the Witnesses were concerned, 'Judge' Rutherford (their second leader) did not give them the name 'Jehovah's Witnesses' until 1931: previously they had simply regarded themselves Bible students, and in the early 1930s the more controversial elements of the Watchtower organization (refusal to celebrate Christmas and birthdays, rejection of blood transfusion, avoiding the use of the sign of the cross, and so on) had not gained momentum. It is worth remembering that, like forms of mainstream religion, new religious movements develop over time, and one of the fascinations of studying them is seeing such developments By contrast, none of the three movements that Crabtree included —Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism —presents itself as an expression of authentic Christianity: all three make modest cla take place before one's eyes.

There may have been a further reason why Crabtree found it unnecessary to comment on the New Christian groups. They relied on authorities — principally the Bible —that Unitarians had formally rejected decades earlier. Hence Unitarians would have found them of little interest in contributing to their own spiritual journey. By contract, none of the three movements that Crabtree included - Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism - presents itself as an expression of authentic Christianity; all three make modest cliams about the person of Jesus, for example; and all three movements would serve to expand the horizons of any interested Unitarians beyond the confines of the Christian faith.

Crabtree's three movements have another important common element: all three entail an interest in psychical and paranormal phenomena. Some Unitarians were at least interested in the para-normal at that time, although the Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies was not founded until substantially later, in 1966. In the early 1930s, however, interest in the paranormal was sufficient for the Lindsey Press to commission a booklet by Leslie J. Belton (1931), in the same series as Crabtree's, entitled *Psychical Research and Religion.*

Crabtree's treatment of Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism is fair, but not uncritical, He even acknowledges that such movements can offer genuine spiritual benefit: Christian Science, for example, 'has clearly shown the immensely beneficent results of a rigorous spiritual discipline' (Crabtree, p30), and Spiritualism shares the concern of those who take seriously the existence of paranormal phenomena. The author is more negative about Theosophy, however, contending that its doctrines of karma and reincarnation are the only ones that merit serious consideration. This conclusion was endorsed in the 1945 Report of a Unitarian Commission: Holt et al affirmed that there was no inherent objection to the empirical investigation of evidence for life after death.

A conflict of values

Despite Unitarianism's spirit of free enquiry and tradition of tolerance, there are several features of NRMs which are distinctly unappealing to members.

Fanaticism vs. free enquiry: First, Unitarians cannot be oblivious to the reports of fanaticism and atrocities connected with new religions. One cannot be unaware of the so-called 'suicide cults' in which substantial numbers of members have lost their lives or put the lives of others in jeopardy for the cause of the new religion: from Jonestown, through Waco, the Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo to, most recently, Heaven's Gate. (No doubt, however, most Unitarians are intelligent enough to realize that such events hit the headlines not because they are typical of what happens in NRMs, but precisely because mass murder or suicide is the exception rather than the norm; and that the vast majority of those who join NRMs can at least expect continued physical survival.) The aggressive methods of evangelization of some NRMs, already mentioned, cannot fail to be a matter of concern.

Unreason vs. reason: Second, Unitarians have always placed a high value on the human faculty of reason, and to many Unitarians, a number of NRMs have seemed less than reasonable. Some are at best speculative, offering little evidence in support of their teachings, and stretching credulity and imagination well beyond their reasonable limits. A striking example is Heaven's Gate, with its blend of science fiction and UFOlogy, its observations of the Hale-Bopp comet, and its eccentric interpretations of the Bible, especially the Book of Revelation.

Throughout the movement's history, Unitarians, valuing human reason so highly, have done much to promote the advancement of knowledge and education. As a consequence, when NRMs appear to be less than rational, to devalue human reason, or cause members to abandon their formal education, these are matters of serious concern. (It should be remembered of course, that—particularly in religion—it is no easy matter to decide what is 'reasonable' and what is not. Also, while I have known converts who have abandoned their education in order to join a new religion, it is also true that some new religions have taken active steps to ensure that at least some of their members further their formal qualifications, in the interests of the movement.)

Authority vs. freedom: In matters of religion, Unitarians expect to engage in debate. This guarantees an immediate lack of empathy with those NRMs (the majority, in fact) which rely on the teachings of a founder-leader who is accorded the status of a supreme guru, a prophet, a messiah, or a divine incarnation: a single leader who appears to have a monopoly of the group's wisdom or insight, or a superior relationship with the supernatural realm. Examples of this are Sun Myung Moon, whose supposed revelations take precedence over the insights of any rank and file member, or L. Ron Hubbard (founder of Scientology), whose writings are read by his followers to the exclusion of almost any other text. Unitarians, I suspect, would find it very frustrating —to put it mildly—to be obliged to accept 'the truth' in the way Jehovah's Witnesses do, with their uncritical study of *The Watchtower* and *Awake*!

The Protestant Reformers propounded the concept of the 'priesthood of all believers', but some Unitarians took this further. In the 1960s, James Luther Adams compiled a book entitled *The Prophethood of All Believers*. Adams' idea was that, although there are undoubtedly 'great' figures in religious history, there is no reason why ideally any believer should not have direct access to God and have the insights afforded to the prophets. We are all 'prophets', with our own inspired insights, and called to comment on moral, social, and political affairs.

Biblicism vs. scepticism: Another feature of NRMs which is inimical to Unitarianism is that, particularly in the 'New Christian' tradition, they often thrive on purporting to interpret religious texts which are left untouched or unexplained by mainstream Christianity. When researching the Unification Church, I came across Biblical stories that I had forgotten: Noah's sons finding him drunk and naked, the circumcision of Gershom, the struggle between Zerah and Perez, and so on. Such stories are seldom, if ever, read in churches, let alone are they the subject of sermons. Yet it is reasonable to hold that, if the whole Bible is inspired by God, such stories must have a purpose and a message.

In Unitarian circles, people are much more inclined to hold that some sacred texts are more helpful than others. (Unitarians may disagree about which are most helpful, of course.) Faced with 'difficult passages', it has always seemed more reasonable to pass them by, believing that perhaps they once spoke to a previous generation, but have lost any meaning for today. (They are certainly not cryptic harbingers of the end times!) For Unitarians, one's reason and one's conscience are the final guides to what one thinks and does.

Passive or active redemption?: A further set of ideas that Unitarians tend to find unappealing relates to salvation and atonement. Although these are by no means found in all NRMs, some of the most prominent propound the idea that their founder-leader has somehow opened the gates of heaven or the path to final spiritual liberation. Thus Sun Myung Moon, for example, has 'paid indemnity' to assure humankind eternal salvation. Other NRMs, such as the Latter-day Saints, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christadelphians among the older generation of NRMs, and The Family and the Jesus Army among the newer ones, are committed to very traditional Christian theories of atonement.

Unitarians, of course, have had serious problems about the doctrine of Christ's vicarious sacrifice and redemptive work, preferring to see Jesus as a teacher and example, rather than the saviour of the world. If spiritual progress is to be made, or 'salvation' won, this is much more likely to happen by one's own efforts, rather than by divine grace mediated through Jesus' death on the cross.

Escape or engagement?: Finally, some NRMs (although not all) seek escape from the material world: *gnosis*, *moksha*, *nirvana*. In the case of Heaven's Gate, suicide was the ultimate means of leaving one's body behind and supposedly entering the kingdom of Heaven. Oppressed by the scale and intensity of human suffering, and haunted by the fear of a final world war, it is very easy to feel helpless in the face of the world's problems, and thus it is understandable that some NRMs — and indeed some older religions too — should teach that the world is evil, or unreal (maya, in Hindu teaching), and that the only spiritual response to the world's predicament is to abandon it in favour of some transcendent reality that supposedly lies beyond.

Despite all the fallibility of the human race, Unitarians have tended to believe in 'original virtue' rather than 'original sin', having faith in the potential of the world and its inhabitants for good as well as evil, and believing that the world is to be enjoyed, improved, and transformed. Unitarianism offers little support to the world-renouncer: there are no Unitarian monastic orders, no Unitarian holy people who abandon the material world, relying on alms. Still less would there be any support for the notion that the world is so bad that the best option is to escape from it by joining a 'suicide cult'. Unitarians belong to a faith that is truly liberating, one which enables them to remain in the world, imperfect as it may be: to live and work in it, and not to escape from it, but to transform it.

The New Age

I turn now to what has come to be known as the 'New Age' phenomenon — of which it is difficult to offer a clear, coherent definition. Anyone who has visited a New Age shop will have noted the multiplicity of topics, viewpoints and paraphernalia that are associated with it. Its variety and eclecticism are as much part of its inherent nature as they are part of its appeal. A cursory browse along the shelves of a New Age bookshop will yield material on meditation, visualization, interpretation of dreams, self-improvement, astrology, Tarot, and crystals. The paranormal is well covered, with material on ESP, telepathy, clairvoyance, psychometry, divination (runes, Tarot, dowsing), precognition, out-of-the-body experiences, and more. The New Age interest in alternative spirituality includes channelling, spirit guides, and angels, as well as some of the doctrines of Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Taoism. Traditional writings like the *I Ching* (the 'Book of Changes', the ancient Chinese oracle), the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Bhagovad Gita* (an important Hindu text) tend to be featured, together with Buddhist writings, principally from the Zen and Tibetan traditions.

Amid so much diversity it can be difficult to pin down the 'New Age' to a precise definition. The term itself refers to the Age of Aquarius which is said to succeed the Age of Pisces. According to astrologers, each zodiacal age lasts for a period of approximately 2,000 years, when a new zodiacal constellation comes to dominate the planet Earth. Because the twelve constellations that make up the zodiac do not occupy clear 30-degree sections of the sky, no exact date can be given for the change-over from Pisces to Aquarius. Dates range from as early as 1898 to as late as 2915; hence some New Agers hold that the New Age has already come, others that it is expected, and others still that we are at the change-over point.

The 2,000-year time span is significant, for approximately 2,000 years have elapsed since the advent of Christianity. To many New Agers, Christianity is represented by the Age of Pisces, and is hence to be regarded as a thing of the past. To them, Christianity involves a highly structured authority, represented in the case of Roman Catholicism, for example, by a hierarchy of bishops, archbishops and cardinals. Throughout its history Christianity has insisted on its creeds and confessions, persecuted its opponents and heretics, and provided strict instruction on ethical behaviour. It is of the very essence of the New Age to reject all this. The New Age has no formal institutional structure; indeed its amorphous nature makes it difficult to define accurately what its elements are. No doubt it is partly because of its implicit claim to be post-Christian that the New Age is singularly disliked by evangelical

Christians. Indeed one evangelical critic states that the New Age is the most serious present-day threat to the Christian faith (Geisler, in Berry, 1988, p3). However, the perceived threat is also due in part to the amorphous character of the New Age phenomenon: since it is not clear precisely what is New Age and what is not, there is a risk that New Age ideas and paraphernalia may inadvertently find their way into the Christian Church, compromising the pure gospel message.

The New Age does not offer an implicit critique of Christianity exclusively: New Agers tend to view all forms of institutionalized religion with suspicion. It is therefore important not to classify the New Age as yet another new religious movement. Paul Heelas writes: 'Some see the New Age Movement as a New Religious Movement (NRM). It is not. Neither is it a collection of NRM' (Heelas,1996, p9).

The New Age's characteristic rejection of institutional religion, its lack of any agreed creed, and the absence of any authoritative hierarchy encourage seeking rather than any certainty that one has found the absolute final truth. For the New Ager, the search is as interesting and rewarding as any experience of finding, and the enormous range of spiritual paths, practices, and paraphernalia serves to encourage an eclecticism on the seeker's part. It is even possible to be part of the New Age and simultaneously part of some more established religious tradition. I recently met one New Ager at a meeting of a New Kadampa Buddhist group; on visiting her home, I found a kind of shrine over which Sai Baba appeared to preside and on which, amid various New Age crystals, she dedicated religious books that she was about to read, one of which was the *Bhagavad Gita*. She was also an ardent follower of Stephen Turoff, a highly acclaimed New Age healer. There are no New Age authorities to determine whether this is a harmonious medley of international religious ecumenism, or whether it is a hotch-potch of inconsistencies: the individual seeker is his or her own arbiter.

It is this symbiosis of ideas that has enabled New Ager Marilyn Ferguson to give to her important sociological study of the New Age the title *The Aquarian Conspiracy*: the word 'conspiracy', as she points out, literally means 'breathing together', which characterizes the way in the which the plethora of New Age themes co-exist. In the absence of any central authority or headquarters, Ferguson points out that New Agers operate by means of 'networking' — another favourite New Age word. Information is shared by means of New Age journals: *Caduceus, Kindred Spirit, and Resurgence* are examples of national publications in Britain, alongside a variety of local network publications. Events like the Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit and the annual Glastonbury Festival provide opportunities for New Agers to disseminate information as well as celebrate their spirituality. The typical New Age shop carries copious advertising by local counter-cultural groups and individuals, spanning shamanists, channellers, healers, and more established religious groups such as forms of Buddhism.

Paganism and the New Age

Although the New Age encompasses such a large variety of ideas, it is important to distinguish the New Age from related forms of spirituality such as Paganism and Wicca. Paganism involves a celebration of the old pre-Christian forms of divinity, particularly in its feminine form. `Goddess spirituality' entails a reaction against the authoritarian male-dominated religion of Christianity. Allied to goddess worship is a deep respect for nature ('mother earth'), the expression of which usually includes the celebration of the eight Celtic seasonal festivals: Imbolc (Candlemas), Beltane (May Day), Lughnasadh (Lammas), Samhain (Hallowe'en), together with the two solstices and equinoxes. Paganism tends to be well organized: the Pagan Federation, founded in Britain in 1971, is the largest and oldest in Europe, and is a central source of publicity and organization. Paganism is thus a fairly discrete and readily definable form of religion, and many Pagans are offended at the common confusion between a goddess religion with clearly defined seasonal festivals and an open-ended spiritual quest which may or may not include crystals, therapies, Arthurian legends and so on.

Strictly speaking, the New Age Unitarians, who form part of the 'fringe' of the British Unitarian scene, are really Pagans rather than New Agers, since their literature mainly relates to goddess spirituality and the celebration of nature. Previously called the Unitarian Pagan Network, they encountered some misunderstanding— not to say hostility— on the part of some Unitarians who did not fully comprehend the meaning of the word ‘pagan', which to them connoted a positively irreligious stance. This popular conception of the pagan arose from the contrast between the Christians and those who adhered to the pre-Christian religions, but in fact the word 'pagan' literally means 'the people of the countryside' (Lash, p337). (Similarly 'heathen ‘literally means 'person of the heath'.)

Paganism may or may not incorporate Wicca, or witchcraft — another form of spirituality which generates much confusion. Those who practise Wicca are usually ‘white witches' — who claim to have learned the 'craft' of magic ('magick') and use it for beneficial purposes such as healing or assistance with life's problems. Wiccans often celebrate sabbaths ('witches' sabbaths') and some celebrate the seasonal festivals observed by Pagans. They are certainly to be distinguished from ‘black witches', of whom there are few: the black witch practises black magic with malevolent aims, Again, the witch — whether white or black — must be distinguished from the Satanist, who is one who overtly practises worship of the devil. Unfortunately, Christian evangelicals often propagate confusion on the subject by using the label 'satanic' to designate any spiritual practice that is at odds with evangelical Christianity. While they are entitled to their own interpretations of these various forms of spirituality, it is nonetheless important to distinguish between those who — perhaps inadvertently — are doing the devil's work and those who are actively and deliberately venerating him! Similar confusions can also be propagated by New Agers, whose open-ended religious seeking may include goddess worship and witchcraft, although their search seldom includes the overtly satanic.

'Holistic' lifestyles

Another typical feature of the New Age is a positive, indeed optimistic, view of the self. The self is certainly not to be disparaged, as in Calvinist doctrines of original sin. Far from being sinful and 'totally depraved', the self is even regarded by some New Agers as divine. As Shirley MacLaine once said, 'I am god, I am god, I am god'. This does not mean that all human beings are perfect, but rather that they have potential for perfection, and should strive for their optimal state of well-being. It also implies that human beings are to be valued for what they are, whether they are male or female, black or white, 'straight' or 'gay': accordingly, it is common to find a substantial amount of literature in New Age book stores championing feminist and gay rights.

Striving for human betterment manifests itself in a variety of New Age interests. One such interest is healing, and there is much exploration of spiritual healing and forms of alternative therapy. These range from the advocacy of homeopathic and herbal remedies to the practices of spiritual healers. At the time of writing, one of the most widely practised is Reiki — a healing technique emanating from Japan which incorporates the laying on of hands. New Agers have little interest in the kind of miracle working that is supposedly performed by Christian evangelists like Morris Cerullo. Spiritual healing is to be distinguished from curing, the latter being targeted at specific physical or mental disorders. Healing, by contrast, relates to the whole self: in the process of healing, the patient (or client) may not necessarily receive a cure for a specific ailment, but may be assisted to come to terms with the ailment, and have his or her whole state of being improved by the process.

Self-improvement goes beyond the alleviation of illness. The New Age seeks to provide a range of possibilities for general self-improvement. *You Can Heal Your Life*, by Louise L Hay, became a cult book, offering methods for affirming one's self, empowering oneself for success, and so on. While mainstream Christianity has extolled the virtues of humility and self-denial, 'empowerment' is a favourite word of New Agers: the self is of worth, and can be enabled to make positive and worth not be achievements. It should not be surprising therefore that New Age ideas extend into the field of 'human potential', which includes inter-personal skills, business skills, assertiveness and neuro-linguistic programming—all subjects that have significantly gained momentum in the conventional world of business in mainstream society. New Age ideas too extend into the fields of education and politics: the interest in the teachings of Rudolf Steiner is an example of the former, and support for organizations like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the Green Party are evidence of the latter.

I mentioned earlier that the New Age represents a move beyond mainstream Christianity. Similarly, aspects of the New Age involve a rejection of traditional authorities in science and medicine, substituting less conventional alternatives. Western science has proceeded by means of empirical observation, logic, hypothesis-testing, and methods of reasoning which are often attributed to the 'left-hand side of the brain'. New Age teachings suggest that over the centuries our science-dominated cultures have neglected the more intuitive aspects of the mind. Consequently, New Age ideas tend to utilize the brain's `right-hand side', emphasizing intuition, creativity, imagination, compassion, healing and so forth. This change of emphasis in part derives from a perceived need to develop the whole of the mind, intuitive as well as logical faculties; in part too it derives from a dissatisfaction with traditional scientific ways of looking at the world. For example, despite advances in modern medicine, new drugs have generated harmful side-effects, and new diseases such as AIDS have arisen, defying cure. The New Age does not profess to cure what allopathic medicine cannot, but its emphasis on holistic healing is intended to ensure optimal well-being in times of ill health, and practitioners have revived practices of herbalism and homeopathy, claiming that these are at least natural and harmless.

All in all, the New Age is singularly world-affirming: it seldom extols the virtues of poverty or austerity, or commends the lifestyle of the monk or the sadh u. Indeed, the very hub of the New Age movement lies within the world of business, its mecca being the New Age shop — a commercial profit-making enterprise, without which New Agers would be unable to obtain the books and artefacts which they need for their spiritual journey or personal development.

Unitarians and the New Age

As one might perhaps expect, Unitarian attitudes to Paganism and the New Age have been somewhat ambivalent. Some appropriation of pagan ideas is evidenced by the formation of Unitarian Universalist Pagans in Canada and the USA, and the New Age Unitarians in

Britain. Indeed, there has been sufficient Unitarian interest in the New Age for Arthur Long in a recent lecture entitled *Current Trends in British Unitarianism* (1997) to identify New Age Unitarianism as one of four important strands within the denomination. In the course of Unitarian history, there have been those who have challenged, at times radically, the 'cold rationalism' that is often associated with the movement. One noteworthy figure is Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose nature mysticism has sometimes earned him the title of the 'father of the New Age movement'.

In 1995, the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly at Spokane voted to amend the UUA Principles, to acknowledge as an important source of inspiration, in addition to the world's major religious traditions, 'spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature' (Chryssides, 1998, plio). The presence of American and Canadian Indians on that side of the Atlantic may well serve to make UUs and Canadian Unitarians more receptive to the values of Native American religion.

There are certainly some affinities between New Age ideas and those of Unitarianism. Both movements reject the authoritarian God of traditional theism, the God whom one Unitarian minister describes as the 'policeman god'— the god who is omnipresent, knowing all our thoughts and noting all our actions, with a view to bringing us to judgement in some final day of reckoning. Many Unitarians prefer to describe God as a 'source of all being', or the ground of existence, while for others the concept of God is not important at all.

Both movements offer a positive view of humanity: Unitarians have long since rejected the doctrines of original sin and 'the total depravity of man', emphasising the goodness of creation and humanity as the pinnacle of God's creative achievement. Similarly, the New Age encourages individuals to feel positively about human nature, and encourages men and women to become 'empowered' to achieve their goals. Both movements are 'world-affirming', neither having much room for austerity or monasticism, both having aspirations to transform the world into something better, and both advocating the involvement of spirituality in the secular arenas of education, politics, medicine, and the like. Both emphasize the importance of human responsibility, placing emphasis on human decision-making, and avoiding those ways of thinking that leave everything to divine election or irresistible grace.

Both movements have moved significantly beyond mainstream Christianity. Just as the Age of Aquarius places the New Age in a new era beyond the Age of Pisces, a significant number of Unitarians would view themselves as 'post-Christian'. While acknowledging the teachings of Jesus as inspiring, most Unitarians would wish to place his teaching not only in the context of his time, but within the arena of the totality of the world's religious traditions. No single individual's teaching can be regarded as valid or authoritative for all time, and no single religious leader can be seen as disclosing the whole final truth about God, humanity, and the universe.

Some Unitarians have seen New Age ideas as affording a new spiritual dimension within the Unitarian movement. In the last few years some have felt that Unitarian worship is unexciting, somewhat prosaic and over-traditional: the rationalist tradition has stifled imagination and inhibited more exciting liturgical innovations. The recently published UU hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tradition*, includes a few pagan, Native American and New Age contributions, including two from Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*. ('Starkhawk' is the assumed name of Miriam Simos, a feminist, peace campaigner, and a high priestess of Wicca.)

Finally, the rejection of creeds and absolute sources of authority characterizes New Ager and Unitarian alike, both of whom tend to see the religious life as a quest rather than a state of discovered certainty. Both movements involve seeking rather than finding, and both encourage the individual to undertake his or her own religious journey, drawing on whatever assists one's personal quest. A Unitarian 'wayside pulpit' once bore the message: *'Some faiths answer your questions. This faith questions your answers.'* However, one may well ask whether the New Age really encourages its followers to question their answers. Indeed, a common criticism of the New Age is that it is uncritical, extolling the virtues of all kinds of counter-cultural alternatives to mainstream philosophy, religion, science, medicine and education, inviting the seeker to engage in unlimited exploration. But are all New Age remedies effective? Is there a proven correlation between one's personality and one's star sign? What kind of 'energy field' do crystals generate that facilitates protection or divination? What is actually happening during a 'past-life regression' session? One Unitarian minister once told me that she regarded it as her mission to counteract the superstitions that the New Age encouraged. This minister's comment is a salutary reminder of the apostle Paul's warning that one should not be 'buffeted by every wind', but rather should 'test the spirits'. While reason may have its limits in matters of religion, anything that cannot stand rational scrutiny must be viewed with a healthy degree of scepticism. While the New Age may indeed suggest some interesting insights into and alternatives to conventional ways of thinking, it also contains more than a measure of superstition, commercial exploitation, and general 'unreason'.

There is no easy formula to enable Unitarians and other spiritual seekers to discern between imaginative alternative spirituality on the one hand and superstitious nonsense on the other. The three-fold Unitarian principle of 'freedom, reason, and tolerance' offers somewhat equivocal guidance here: on the one hand, there is merit in exploring new, sometimes even improbable, alternatives to conventional ways of thinking about the world, and hence tolerance demands at least a readiness to co-exist with those who challenge our conventional world-view. On the other hand, the principle of reason prevents us from accepting an intellectual anarchy in which 'anything goes', Not all new ideas are good ideas. Unitarians cannot subscribe to exclusivity, superstition, or an uncritical acceptance of 'alternative' practices and philosophies. The right to hold an opinion does not mean that every opinion is as valid as any other.

It is no doubt true that Unitarians have typically emphasized the left-hand side of the brain, while New Agers have emphasized the right. It might be safe to conclude that both sides of the brain have a role in a holistic approach to life. Perhaps Unitarians have over-emphasized the left and New Agers the right. If that is so, perhaps Unitarians can implant some moderation and logic to counter the excesses of New Age irrationalism, but perhaps too at least some New Age ideas can help to inject a revival of spirituality within a denomination that is in danger of being excessively rational, at times unduly prosaic, and, some believe, in need of spiritual renewal.

Three kinds of spirituality?

From my discussion of these two types of contemporary spirituality — new religious movements and the New Age—I suspect that the majority of Unitarians today are likely to be somewhat more sympathetic to the latter than to the former. Authoritarianism, false certainties, and dogmas that are to be learned rather than discussed are quite at variance with the spirit of Unitarianism. Yet, although such features great odds with the Unitarian approach, not everyone is comfortable with a personal spiritual quest, where no firm answers are provided and where the onus rests on individuals to use their own reason and conscience in spiritual and moral matters. For many, the large questions about the nature of God, the purpose of the universe and how one ought to live are issues far too important to admit subjective speculation. Just as I regard my car's brakes as too important to risk tampering with myself and therefore rely on an expert in such matters, many followers of religions prefer to rely on an external authority, whether it be a pope, a Bible, a guru, or a messianic claimant (old or new). It is therefore incumbent on Unitarians to extend tolerance to those who prefer a radically different spiritual path that offers certainties rather than encourages doubts.

Such tolerance need not entail approval or support, but at the very least demands an ability to co-exist harmoniously. Of course Unitarians have the right to proclaim the merits of religious freedom in the face of narrow dogmatism, and they most certainly have the duty to warn against possible dangers and malpractices within new and old religions. However, the dangers should not be exaggerated: most NRM members and New Agers do not end up as brainwashed zombies or commit mass suicide in a tragedy like Jonestown or Heaven's Gate. Unitarians, like all other responsible citizens, have a duty to inform themselves properly about new religions before expressing criticism or hostility, and should not fall prey to the scaremongering and demonising that are so prevalent in the media.

Most Unitarians would at least agree that the public has the right to accurate media coverage of new religions, and that the press and the television channels could be fairer to them. A few Unitarian churches have gone further, and actually invited adherents of new religions to talk to congregations, to help them to understand something of their character and appeal. A few individual Unitarians actually belong to other minority religious groups, while still remaining in the Unitarian Church. In my own congregation, there are Unitarians who simultaneously belong to Brahma Kumaris, the Rosicrucians, and the Church of Swedenborg, and I have never heard anyone express disapproval.

In conclusion, although a few present-day Unitarians enjoy a religious 'dual nationality', and a good few more claim to espouse 'New Age Unitarianism', I would hazard a guess that the vast majority of Unitarians favour a middle course between the dogmatism and seemingly unwarranted certainties that characterize some of the new religions, and the often uncritical wide-openness that is the hallmark of many a New Ager. How precisely one achieves this balance is no easy matter to determine, but the threefold principle of freedom, reason, and tolerance at least provides an important framework in which to appraise these new forms of spirituality.

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Questions for discussion

1. Does the New Age offer new elements of spirituality that could help to renew Unitarianism?
2. A new religious movement has asked if it can rent your church's premises. What is your response? What further information might you need before deciding? Are there any conditions you might want to impose?
3. Unitarians have had a tradition of encouraging inter-faith dialogue. Should such dialogue be extended to new religious movements? If so, how?

4. We often have to rely on authorities in everyday life (such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, car mechanics). Why not also in religion?
5. Are there limits to tolerance? Where do they lie?
6. What is it about new religious movements that arouses such strong feelings? Are such reactions justified?

The author

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Unitarians and the Sea of Faith

Frank Walker

Kind friends once took me to the London Coliseum to see a seldom-performed opera: *The Adventures of Mr Broucek* by Janacek. We enjoyed excellent seats in the middle of the circle, with an uninterrupted view of the stage, which was splendidly framed by the vast and elegant proscenium arch. The opera delves back into the past, the Prague of the great Czech reformer Jan Hus, and also, in extravagant fantasy, takes us up to the moon before returning us to the twentieth century.

Even when an opera is sung in English, it is not always easy to follow an unfamiliar plot. What exactly was going on in these medieval, modern, or lunar settings? Fortunately, we had programme notes to which we could refer whenever we felt bewildered. The notes gave us an authoritative account of what was happening. So we could sit back in our comfortable seats and enjoy the spectacle and the music. If we wished, we could ignore the text for the moment and relish being challenged by puzzlement and uncertainty, knowing that if our perplexity became too intolerable, we could consult our programmes to find the true story clearly revealed. It was a delightful way of spending an enjoyable evening.

Later, I came to see my experience as a parable. Sitting in the circle and looking on at an opera below me was clearly the very opposite of what our human situation really is. In actual life we are all of us down there on the stage, and never off it. There are no intervals when we can disappear to the bar. However injured we may be, we will still never be allowed off stage. From chrism to shroud, whether we like it or not, we are all actors, for ever engaged in the drama, however little we understand it. The drama began long before we made our entrance; it will continue long after our departure. There is no off-stage, for the stage is the universe and there is no hiding place.

The action surges all around us and within us, an ever-shifting kaleidoscope. Much can be confidently predicted, though we can never know absolutely for sure, because chance and accident are always happening. We have only our own viewpoint, our own limited perspective on things, which we may compare with the viewpoints of as many other of our fellow-actors as we can manage. Sometimes we shall agree; often we shall differ. However bewildering life is, however painful, we shall have to make the best of it.

We are all actors, and none of us can mark off the action by constructing some great proscenium arch beyond which we give up acting and become spectators. We shall never be given a seat in the circle with a God's-eye view; there are no authoritative programme notes to be handed to us. We make up our stories, we venture out in exploration, we yearn in hope and aspiration —we do all these things in the hurly-burly of the action as we go along.

Naturally, down there in the thick of it, as willy-nilly we all are, there sometimes come thoughts of possible privileges that could lift us to a new perspective far beyond our partial viewpoint. Could not the theatre management give us, if not a comfortable seat in the circle, at least a glimpse from the gods? Couldn't the management provide us with a marvellous supremely arching framework and some programme notes that will settle things once and for all?

It seems such a good idea that some people believe it must have happened: if not for them personally, then for certain privileged people such as Moses and the Hebrew prophets, or Jesus, or Muhammad, who have been vouchsafed a God's-eye view and also the divinely authorized programme notes.

If these special persons had indeed been given the privileged God's-eye view which is claimed for them, then surely we should expect them all to have arrived at exactly the same conclusion — which they manifestly have not. In fact we find that one person's allegedly authoritative programme notes and his or her particular view from the gods do not exactly match the equally authoritative (or so it is claimed) views and notes of similarly self-professed privileged persons. This drives us to the conclusion that, despite all the claims made, these are after all still personal perspectives, rather than the final and complete divine revelations that some suppose they are.

The stories are just that: stories, imaginative constructions, leaps of faith; but however high the leap, it has not taken the leaper off the stage. Stories of the management furnishing the actors with the programme notes—still less with the full script of the play—are stories, nothing more. They are human inventions made by actors on stage, but not necessarily any the worse for that. After all, anything produced by human beings, however sublime, must be a human invention, for what else could it be? Stories are the product of a perspective — and perspectives are always shifting, fading, and reforming. And as the action on the universal stage is always in flux, it is inevitable that one perspective can never be final, though we are happy to recognize that some perspectives may be wider and deeper than others.

When, in the midst of this ever-moving unscripted drama, the actors respond to the sense of overwhelming creative power, to the sparkles of glory that thrill them, to the meanings that they can find or form, to the trust and hope and loving kindness that they may show forth themselves and also encounter in others, to the help which seems to come from deep within the whole drama, then to all this, and more, they may say, haltingly, by way of invocation, 'God'. They are not giving a precise description of the mystery; they are giving a name to it, one which helps them to come to terms with it.

This understanding of our human situation places a question mark against all claims to finality made on behalf of any religious, philosophical, or scientific world-view. Human perspectives are always changing, and the last word on any subject has not yet been said. Religion, no less than science, the arts, philosophy, and systems of government, is a human creation. Creeds, however passionately proclaimed and believed, can never be final. It is true that conviction will always be more impressive and valuable than half-hearted indecision or indifference, but even the strongest convictions arise from what is necessarily a limited perspective. All this makes us wary of the dogmatic approach. W.H. Auden applauded dogma and compared it to the grammar which underlies language and is therefore indispensable. In reply, I should say that language comes first, and there is in fact no single grammar, but many possible grammars that can be deduced from it, and none is final or absolute. The free-flowing spontaneity of language, ever creating and recreating itself, is primary and indispensable, and all grammatical systems are but secondary deductions.

What religious movements are in harmony with this naturalistic approach? Quakers and Unitarians pride themselves upon being 'non-credal', that is, not insisting on creed-based tests for membership or religious fellowship, and welcoming a wide diversity of perspectives; among Unitarians the religious spectrum extends from a traditional liberal Christianity to a non-theistic religious humanism. In fact, many other people both in the mainstream churches and outside them share this naturalistic outlook.

This fact has been made clear by the emergence in Britain and New Zealand of a radical religious movement called 'The Sea of Faith'. Its detractors amuse themselves by calling it 'Faith at Sea', under the assumption that faith means loyally believing in things once and for all delivered in the past. Unitarians take the contrary view: that faith is trusting oneself to venture out in exploration, like Abraham, not knowing whither one goes, but believing that the journey will be supremely valuable.

The Sea of Faith is, in part, the product of one man's thinking, made accessible by that most popular modern medium of communication, television. In the early 1970s Don Cupitt, Anglican priest, Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Cambridge University Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion, took part in the great debate that was then underway on the Jewishness of Jesus. Together with Peter Armstrong, a BBC producer, he wrote a television series and book entitled Who Was Jesus?, which was largely inspired by the recent work of the eminent Jewish scholar, Geza Vermes.

A non-realist idea of God

In 1980 Don Cupitt published *Taking Leave of God*, an essay in radical theology which espouses a 'non-realist' view, in which God becomes the 'mythical representation of what the spiritual life requires of us and promises to us'.

A brief attempt, however simplistic, to understand 'non-realism' may be in order here. Cupitt wishes to banish the view that religion is about some other world than the one we now inhabit. Plato, he thinks, has bewitched the Western world with his false and alluring ideas of a perfect higher world beyond this unsatisfactory and unreal world. Christians took over this philosophy and began to think of God as some objective being in a higher heavenly realm. This outlook, which he calls 'theological realism', Cupitt believes is false. It devalues this world and it offers false consolation. We must not expect some heavenly being in some mysterious other world to come and put everything right for us. The cosmological and consolatory aspects of religion must be abandoned.

'Non-realism' is opposed to the view that might be called 'thingification', that something is valuable only if there corresponds to it some external object. Cupitt the 'non-realist' tells us that we need not imagine God as some 'objective' reality outside the universe. Why not imagine God as the highest possible ideal that human beings can think of, the sum of all our values? Then God becomes the spiritual requirement, the inner demand that we fashion our lives in accordance with this highest ideal —which is a human creation, admittedly, but how could it be otherwise?

The intellectual history of the modern world that Cupitt provided in his second television series, The *Sea of Faith,* points to an uncomfortable conclusion. Kant had showed that all our knowledge is inescapably human knowledge and cannot be anything more. Nietzsche went further, with his doctrine of nihilism: the universe is without any objective meaning or purpose. Humans are in a terrifying and tragic situation: we ourselves must be the meaning-givers and creators of value. Scientific theories, too, it must be understood, are entirely human constructions and can claim no objective validity. If the bleakest pictures of human life and the universe are true, can we still be religious? Yes, says Cupitt, but we must practise the spiritual life for its own sake, not for any reward.

Whether this is bad news or good news, it is certainly not the story we are used to. Official Christian mythology is very comforting and reassuring. The story says that we human beings have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. There is no health in us. We need not despair, though, because a supernatural being has intervened in the past and will intervene again to put things right. This myth harmonizes very well with the basic hidden myth of modern Western society. Our secular myth underlies thousands of stories and films, and goes like this: a community feels troubled, threatened, utterly miserable, and none inside it can save it. At last, though, rescue arrives, with some wonderful outsider who comes in and puts things right.

Don Cupitt proposes a different myth. There isn't anybody outside who is going to put everything right: there isn't any outside anyway. So we ourselves must put things right, or as right as they ever can be. As Anne Cavidge is told by the visionary Christ in Iris Murdoch's novel Nuns and Soldiers: 'the work is yours'. Such a story will never be popular.

This is a humanist myth that seems to contradict the other two myths—though perhaps it can include them, just as larger Russian dolls include smaller ones. Can you commend the humanist myth and still use the official Christian language? This will certainly involve you in ambivalence and conflict, which may be all to the good, for in Cupitt's view these are necessary and creative experiences.

The good news from 'non-realism' is that we are no longer servants below stairs in Kafka's castle, waiting for orders from some mysterious Upstairs, 'It is time to decide that there is nothing wrong with the senses, the body, this world, time and this life, and there is nothing wrong with the standards and values that we ourselves have developed. It is time to give up the old sense of exile ... We want a quite new kind of Kingdom-religion, grown-up, open-air and free-moving' (*After All, Religion without Alienation*, 1994,pll).

The challenge to orthodoxy

The publication of Taking *Leave of God* meant that Don Cupitt could no longer be employed by the Religious Department of the BBC, so his new series, called *The Sea of Faith*, was made by the independent company Network Features. (The name of the series was taken from Matthew Arnold's poem 'On Dover Beach', in which the poet imagines that he hears 'the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the sea of faith as it ebbs away from 'the naked shingles of the world'.) The programmes tried to show why we should be interested in religion at all, and gave the history of the ideas that have brought us to where we are now. As most people are horrified at the thought of modifying religion in any way, and can hardly believe that such a thing has ever been done, Cupitt wished to show that religious orthodoxy does not exist in a vacuum in some unchanging time-warp, but that religion lives in history and is certainly open to change and development.

The series attracted up to two million viewers. Interestingly, it never appeared in the USA (though it is available there on video), because, even on the Public Broadcasting System, programmes are sponsored by named individuals, groups or companies, and none dares risk offending the evangelicals and fundamentalists. Consequently no controversial religious television may be shown in the USA. Happily, the British are made of sterner stuff, and the series provoked up to eighty letters a day, many sympathetic to the radical views expressed by Don Cupitt.

A group of Anglican parsons in Leicestershire watched the television series with special interest. Many of them held livings that were in the gift of Emmanuel College and therefore had ties with that institution and its controversial Dean. They met for discussion and called themselves 'The Don Cupitt Preservation Society'. Excited by the television series, they proposed to hold a public conference at Loughborough University to explore the issues arising from it. At first Don Cupitt was cautious: he did not wish to found a fan club, and had no desire to become a guru or heresiarch himself. (This is altogether admirable, but not easy to achieve. In other circumstances it is conceivable that Cupitt might have been offered the very highest positions in the Church of England, and people will make such a person into a guru despite all his disclaimers.) Any organization or conference, he believed, must be pluralist, and possess its own identity and momentum, and not be tied to one individual. He picked out 150 of the most interesting letters and the Leicester Mafia (as the local clergy were dubbed) organized the first highly successful conference.

At the beginning, many people were nervous. Confidentiality was important, for some did not wish the world, or more significantly the church authorities, to know of their presence at such a gathering. To be seen with Don Cupitt would not enhance anyone's career prospects.

The concerns of the Sea of Faith movement were clearly expressed at its first conference at Loughborough in 1988. Don Cupitt (and here I am largely quoting or paraphrasing his argument) assumed a general agreement on such matters as the following.

Religion matters to society, because society needs a common faith, a stock of shared symbols, themes, and values, and the vocabulary with which to discuss the great issues of life. We need rituals to mark the great occasions and decisions in our lives. Also, religion matters to us individually; we are not indifferent.

The religion that matters to most of us in Britain is our native language, the Jewish-Christian heritage. We need especially a re-interpretation of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Yet whether we call ourselves Christian or not, we are committed to the religious humanism that has become possible in the modern world since the seventeenth century, the kind of humanism that is reflected in the paintings and drawings of Rembrandt. There we see ordinary human beings imbued with a dignity and intensity that we can call religious. Rembrandt's vision of the beauty that can be found even in suffering and old age is in harmony with many of the insights of the Bible. It is this kind of humanism and humanitarianism that has transformed the world for the good in the past two or three centuries. (Unitarians will find this reference to Rembrandt specially interesting, for Rembrandt was a Unitarian sympathizer. Scholars have discovered that his portrait entitled 'Dr Faustus', which had long puzzled them, is in fact an idealized portrait of none other than Faustus Socinus, the pioneer Unitarian reformer of the sixteenth century. The picture indicates Rembrandt's admiration and sympathy for Socinus, but more profoundly his art stresses the humanity and Jewishness of Jesus in ways entirely in harmony with Unitarian insights.)

Cupitt stressed the social and political importance of the Church. In some countries it is the only opposition to despotic governments. The modern state is immensely strong. It can be utterly overwhelming. It has devices and techniques and force at its disposal to give it almost total control over human lives, and to crush any alternative approach or in sight that it disapproves of. This is totalitarianism, and it did not die with Hitler and Stalin.

In an increasingly barbarous world we need an opposition to the totalitarian power of the state. We need a great and enduring society whose job it is to maintain and strengthen our moral and spiritual values. Such an organization the Church may ideally aspire to be.

This Christian and religious humanism that we wish to prosper has come to fruition in the last three centuries. It first became strong in seventeenth-century Holland. (Unitarians, through their stress on the true humanity of Jesus, can be proud of having played a significant part in this humanizing of religion and of Christianity.) In the nineteenth century this impulse expressed itself in the great humanitarian movements such as the anti-slavery campaign. In the twentieth century it energizes the great human-rights movements of our time. It must be preserved, because it makes life worth living. The Church is important because it is the instrument by which this Christian, religious, humanistic spirit can be given form and expression, and can be protected, sustained, and renewed.

The traditional church, however, is locked into an out-of-date world-view. When you go to church, you usually have to become a kind of time-traveller, like people in science-fiction stories. You are travelling back into the past, with a completely different view of the world which we know is an out-of-date view. It sees our society as subservient to a supernatural world above, to which everything here must be related. Traditional Christianity took over this strongly supernatural world-view from the ancient Greeks.

At the same time, orthodox Christianity showed a great concern with rank order in the world above and in this world. Angels and archangels, thrones, dominations, powers, all grades of demons up to Lucifer himself — all this came to obsess Christianity, as well as a concern for the careful grading of the ranks below. Inequality was celebrated in the Church, and that was anti-human. A carefully graded hierarchy controlled the Church, and theology was designed to serve the interests and preserve the power of the people at the top. Historic Christianity was not so much interested in emancipation as in manufacturing hierarchies in heaven and earth so that everything was felt to be safely under control. For example, consider how St Thomas Aquinas answered the question 'why was woman created? 'After all, could not God have created another man to help Adam? Why didn't he? St Thomas answers: *because a universe of hierarchy where one rules over another is a better universe (Summa Theologiae,* Pars 1, Quaestio 91, Art 1).

In the seventeenth century all this began to break down. Attempts have been made to free the Church from its out-dated world-view, but they have failed. Therefore the Church has been in decline for centuries. The faith is in the past tense. Much of Church doctrine is simply not tenable at all. It is a situation that must make all lovers of the Church very unhappy.

Since the Enlightenment which blossomed in the eighteenth century, Christianity has been transformed. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, which included the growing Unitarian movement in Europe and America, Christianity has become humanitarian. It is interested in human rights and in a fair deal for the disadvantaged. It wants to see power more evenly distributed. It strives to improve the conditions of life of the poorest. This development of the humanitarian spirit is a great achievement. Because of it, the world is not so cruel as it once was. This is the finest achievement Christianity has to bring to any multi-faith dialogue. Even so, all this is at odds with the theological structures that have been inherited from the past. We need to develop a religion that finds equality and creativity exciting, a religion that loves the free-flowing spontaneity of the here-and-now world. Our future is genuinely open, and it is up to us to create it. The truth is that we live in a natural world: we are part of nature. Our religion is wholly natural. It has been envisioned and created over centuries by men and women. We human beings are visionary creatures. We are artists and mythmakers. We cannot live satisfactorily without forming imaginative worlds for ourselves. People have built the imaginative world of traditional Christianity. And now we must rebuild it.

Such is Don Cupitt's argument.

New stories and new meanings

The approach to 'sacred Scripture' taken by the Sea of Faith was indicated by Professor Dennis Nineham. Traditionally, the Christian attitude has been that we should submit to the Bible, conform to it, allow it to dictate to us. Actual practice has been very different, though. Much of the Bible has been allegorized, and the Church has taught that the surface meaning really signifies something else: that the Song of Songs, for example, a secular Hebrew love poem, means the love of Christ for his Church. In fact this disregards what the Bible actually says and directs our attention elsewhere.

We may be confident that if St Paul had moved east into India, Christianity would have been very different. Instead he moved west, and it became a religion expressed in the thought-forms of the Greek world and allied to the legalistic spirit of the Romans, ultimately becoming the heir of the Roman empire. That is why Christianity became so legalistic and creed-bound.

From the fall of the Roman empire to the seventeenth century, Europe remained agricultural, non-industrial, non-mechanized. People's situation and outlook remained very similar to those of early Christian times. The Bible could be read and accepted without doing violence to people's overall experience of life. Then in the seventeenth century a great movement of change began, which gathered momentum in the eighteenth century. The 'doctrines felt as facts' (to use T.E. Holme's phrase) changed. It became impossible to accept the Bible in the old way. People became aware that it had to be interpreted and that they must be selective. The idea that the Bible can completely control our lives and beliefs has been found to be impossible. To assert that the Bible says something does not settle anything. We can no longer claim that the only religious truth for today is in the Bible. Don Cupitt himself has argued that for modern Christians the New Testament has become their Old Testament, as it were. A modern Christian reciting the Psalms, for example, can seldom pretend that he or she means them in the same way that their original authors meant them. We must read the New Testament also in this spirit.

The 'story' that we have to tell about life can no longer simply be the Bible story. It will be reticent about the inner working of God. Ancient cultures thought we could get behind the scenes, as it were, as though we were privileged spectators, and find out how God works. We know that is impossible. We are all actors on the stage, with all the limitations of perspective which that implies. The new story will be aware of the insights of non-Christian religions. It will refer not only to the Christian tradition. It will absorb the insights of feminism. Traditional religion has been utterly male-dominated, and this will have to go. The new story will drop the old idea of constant supernatural intervention in the world, because we know that it doesn't happen like that.

A world without certitudes

Whether people like it or not, the inexorable process of historical change will affect ways of believing and interpreting in even the most ancient religious traditions. At Botsford Parkin the Cotswolds, I once came across some words inscribed on a memorial tablet to an eighteenth-century vicar: *'The Reverend Thomas Burton, Doctor in Divinity, a lover of Hospitality, and a cheerful promoter of every Social, every Liberal Affection. Justice, Humanity, Benevolence and Charity marked the character of this excellent man, whose life was so uniformly good that Death, though sudden, found him not unprepared.*'

We don't write epitaphs like that nowadays. We don't live in such an age of apparently untroubled assurance (if indeed people ever did). On the illimitable stage of the universe we are here (to quote from Matthew Arnold's poem) 'as on a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight'. Those words ring true, but it will not do to endorse everything in that poem. The sea of faith, in the sense of one world-encompassing religious ideology unquestioningly accepted by all, was never 'at the full'. The world may not offer absolute certitude, but it is absurd to deny that in it people may experience 'joy, love, light, peace and help for pain'. Matthew Arnold delighted in expressing the utmost scorn and distaste for Unitarians, a feared and unpopular minority, as if by doing so he could disguise the unpalatable fact that his own religious views could in fact with perfect propriety be described as Unitarian. As an elitist, unnerved at the prospect of the established church losing its power and at the thought that intellectually he himself was no longer within it, he could not bear to be tarred with that non-conformist brush. Such a phenomenon has not been unknown subsequently.

To return to the memorial tablet at Batsford Park. How different today's clergy seem from Thomas Burton: in turmoil in fact, just like the religious situation generally. Novelists, it has been said, are like dogs sniffing the air before earthquakes, alert for the first signs of movement that will erupt in the future. Current seismic perturbations in the religious world are interestingly revealed in the clergy who so often feature in Iris Murdoch's novels. I call them 'the fantastic vicars'. Like Matthew Arnold and the non-theistic humanist Unitarians, vicars of this kind do not believe in God or in the divinity of Christ, but they continue, usually, to exercise their priestly functions. In *The Time of the Angels*, the demented Carel Fisher says, `you cannot imagine how often I have been tempted to announce from the pulpit that there is no God. It would be the most religious statement that could be conceived of.' Fr Bernard Jacoby in The *Philosopher's Pupil* declares from his exile on a Greek island:

Nothing else but true religion can save mankind from a lightless and irredeemable materialism, from a technocratic nightmare where determinism becomes true for all ... can religion survive and not, with us, utterly perish? This has been revealed to me as the essential and only question of our age. What is necessary is the absolute denial of God. Even the word, the name must go. What then remains? Everything, and Christ too, but entirely changed and broken down into the most final and absolutely naked simplicity.
(Murdoch 1983, p552)

The nun Anne Cavidge ceases to believe in God and leaves the convent, observing: 'Perhaps people don't all that often just lose their faith. I want to make a new kind of faith privately for myself.' Iris Murdoch has sniffed out the existence of such people—but where are they to be found in the flesh?

In 1988 they could be found at the first Sea of Faith conference in Loughborough. Here was a group of people who no longer saw religion as a divinely revealed body of doctrine and practice guaranteed for all eternity, but as an all-too-human creation, a way of expressing and reinforcing human values, constantly changing, but none the worse for that.

It was rarely possible at the conference to tell a person's denomination or profession from outward appearances. After someone had expressed the most radical views, it was an agreeable surprise when he admitted to being a vicar: lo, the Church of England widened in one's view. One vicar looked upon his church as the place where all could come and express the religion that was in them. He encouraged them to compose their own services for the welcome and blessing of children, for weddings and funerals. He allowed other religious groups such as Sikhs and Hindus to use his church building for their own services. Some might accuse him of stealing the Unitarians' clothes, though one could not but wish him well. The Sea of Faith conferences bear witness to the fact that there is often a gulf between what is proclaimed in official ecclesiastical documents and what actually happens on the ground among the grass-roots. At the Sea of Faith conferences, denominational labels or the lack of them do not matter at all. This is refreshing. It poses a problem, though, for those, the majority, belonging to religious groups that stress orthodoxy.

The dilemma for non-realist Christians

Official Christianity declares its origin in a once-and-for-all divine revelation, supernaturally guaranteeing a sacred organization and promising a divine consummation in a future life. Sea of Faith members believe none of this, but many remain in organizations which consider such supernatural claims to be their basic *raison d'être*.

This provokes tension and conflict. Don Cupitt has reminded us that conflict is an essential ingredient in the stuff of life. He is echoing a Victorian Unitarian, J.J. Tayler, who said, very memorably,

Conflict under some form or other seems an indispensable condition of social progress. The repose and uniformity so ardently desired by some theorists are the unequivocal signs, wherever they occur, of a stationary or a declining civilisation. Exemption from opposition and questioning relaxes the motives to exertion and brings a torpor over all the facilities. This is especially true of the intellectual and spiritual life of man. Without antagonism, mental health, practical wisdom and the constant development of fresh truth are impossible. (Tayler, 1876, p.1)

Radicals have departed so far from conventional views of what religion in general and Christianity in particular are about that many experience grave existential conflict. Should they stay in the churches or not? Should they setup on their own? Consider the following parable.

Once upon a time there existed a Society for the Study of Classical Mythology. It brought together scholars who studied the myths of ancient Greece and Rome. Editions of the ancient texts were published, as were commentaries and scholarly discussions. Conferences were held; festivals were celebrated, in which plays that told the stories of the ancient legends were acted out. It was very successful and enjoyable, and the organization was most efficient.

Then some of the committee members began to be dissatisfied. 'Why are we concerning ourselves with these ancient myths? they asked. 'Aren't we in danger of becoming out of date? Yes, the SSCM is very well-known and respected. It does excellent work. We wouldn't dream of changing its name. But can't we be more scientific? Can't we devote ourselves to the scientific study and practice of social welfare? Keep the old organization and the venerable traditions, but let's devote our resources to social welfare. After all, that's what the ancient myths are really getting at, isn't it?

They did not convince the other committee members, and the arguments became more heated. At last the President of the Society was forced to intervene. 'Our Society is what it says it is, 'he declared. 'We cannot change its basis. We do not exist for the study and practice of social welfare. Those who cannot accept our basis must leave and form their own society, and not use our resources for purposes for which they were never intended.'

The point at issue is whether Sea of Faith people in the traditional churches are like the disgruntled committee members of the SSCM. Are churches like clubs, their doctrines like club-rules?

There are two conflicting tendencies within the Sea of Faith. One is represented by those who wish primarily for a wide liberty of interpretation of the existing religious traditions. The other consists of those who wish to make new beginnings. These tendencies may exist within the same individual, within Cupitt himself, for example. Such ambivalence certainly exists among Unitarians.

Cupitt has said that we cannot invent a new religion. We must start where we are and make the best of what we have. Professor Loyal Rue, an American Lutheran, agreed. Do not leave the churches to the fundamentalists. Radicals are as much a part of the tradition; they have a right to be there and to make their voices heard. Don Cupitt, in at least one of his 'personae', is a very Establishment figure who well understands the virtues of great historic international societies that confer status and privilege and wield vast power. Blessed are the powerful, for they shall be able to do something. Many people in the Sea of Faith feel that their own radical religious humanism should be accepted as one valid option, one acceptable interpretation, within the great ecclesiastical organizations.

The need for religious revision has long been understood by Unitarians, even by those who most strongly uphold the value of tradition. Over a hundred years ago James Martineau, in the conclusion of his work *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, argued as follows:

Christianity, as defined or understood in all the churches which formulate it, has been mainly evolved from what is transient and perishable in its sources: from what is unhistorical in its traditions, mythological in its preconceptions, and misapprehended in the oracles of its prophets. From the fable of Eden to the imagination of the last trumpet, the whole story of the divine order of the world is dislocated and deformed. ... To consecrate and diffuse, under the name of 'Christianity', a theory of the world's economy thus made up of illusions from obsolete stages of civilisation, immense resources, material and moral, are expended, with effect no less deplorable in the province of religion than would be, in that of science, hierarchies and missions for propagating the Ptolemaic astronomy, and inculcating the rules of necromancy and exorcism.
(Martineau, 1891,p650)

At present, radicals are uneasily tolerated, because the hierarchy doesn't know what to do and hopes they will just die or go away. The greatest challenge to Establishment-minded radicals lies in their relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. Are they going to be accepted there? The condemnation of so moderate a figure as Fr Hans Kung is not encouraging. It is unlikely that the great churches will accept the radicals, because to do so would undermine the basis of their own claims to authority and power. Radicals must put up with a shifty existence, remaining where they are under a cloak of borrowed respectability.

In the USA, religious humanism achieved institutional expression in the 1930s by taking over a majority of Unitarian congregations outside New England. It still maintains a vigorous existence within the half-million strong Unitarian—Universalist Association. So movements like the Sea of Faith are nothing new. In 1933 a group of American Unitarian ministers produced the Humanist Manifesto, setting forth a consistently non-supernaturalistic view of religion. It is still worth reading today:

Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life. Their end has been accomplished through the interpretation of the total environing situation (theology or world-view), and the sense of values resulting there from (goal or ideal), and the technique (cult) established for realising the satisfactory life. A change in any of these factors results in alteration of the outward forms of religion ... But through all changes religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values, an inseparable feature of human life. (*Humanist Manifesto*, I, 1933, Preamble; in American Humanist Association, 1973)

In Britain today such religious humanism finds an openly accepted place within the Society of Friends, as well as among the Unitarians.

In the great churches things are different. Fr Anthony Freeman has been dismissed for publishing a book expressing Sea of Faith ideas and a non-realist view of God. It is instructive to consider reactions to this event and critical responses to the approach to religion advocated by the Sea of Faith.

An atheist professor of Biblical Studies, himself an ex-priest, applauded Freeman's sacking on the grounds that when the Church fails to root out non-believing clerics, it is simply showing itself to be moribund. Like the President of the SSCM in the parable, he sees the Church as a club with very definite rules. If you don't like the rules, get out and start your own club. Do not indulge in meaningless double-talk. Not that the atheist professor sees any value in religious humanism, which he scorns as a contradiction in terms, absurd, weak, wishy-washy. He admires those whose beliefs are so strong that they are prepared to kill for them. The more people a religion kills, the stronger it is. This reminds me of the late Malcolm Muggeridge's attitude to Stalin: the more people the Russian dictator had murdered, the readier Muggeridge became to hail him as one of the greatest men of the century.

Other atheist critics of the Sea of Faith include the late Sir Kingsley Amis. He had no belief in the existence of God. Faith is a gift that he confessed he lacked, but he admitted that people 'without faith are the poorer for it in every part of their lives'. A world without religion in it, he said, 'would be as sad and dreadful a place as a world in which art as we have known it might become impossible to create.' Amis admired hierarchy and liked clerics who are experts and have the guts to tell others what to believe. He ridiculed talk of 'values', where 'Jack's view is as good as his master's, and all can agree that compassion and peace, for instance, are what to believe in. More popular than the Trinity, and much more fun.' He hated a Church which tries to keep up with the times. No: let it 'preach the Christian religion, at whatever price in incomprehension, indifference and hostility, and wait for the times to return to it if they will' (*The Amis Collection*, p228). This is an eloquent defence of nostalgia and prejudice, such as one might expect from a former fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge.

A sermon by Professor Ernest Gellner in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, also attacked the Sea of Faith. Himself an atheist, Professor Gellner nevertheless affected to admire the fundamentalists for their sense of responsibility to truth. They are serious — however mistaken. Gellner argued that people who are obsessed by the ideas of contemporary French literary theorists have lost their seriousness. Those who claim to see no difference between fact and fiction should try telling that to Elie Wiesel and the survivors of Auschwitz.

Some of these attacks on the Sea of Faith proceed from a view of religion as essentially unalterable and unchanging. Any change would be for the worse, so the pristine religion of the past is best, and acquires a romantic aura. Religion becomes a kind of theme park for nostalgic visits. The Victorians started this with their idealization of the Middle Ages, and it has become the most popular view of religion in present-day England: religion as a branch of the National Trust. The Sea of Faith strongly opposes such indulgence in nostaigia.

Neither is the Sea of Faith wedded to French literary theory; nor can one accept the commending of fundamentalism and its absolutism as properly serious. If it were true that fundamentalism produces the good society, then those Middle Eastern countries that are today in the grip of fundamentalist r6gimes ought to be shining paradises. In fact they are bywords for muddle, cruelty, and corruption.

Re-envisioning religion

The Sea of Faith is pluralist and is not wedded to any one philosophical position, apart from understanding religion as a human creation, something that has been envisioned by men and women and may therefore be revisioned by them. Don Cupitt is celebrated for his upholding of a thorough-going 'non-realism' in philosophy and theology. Contrary to what outsiders imagine, the Sea of Faith has no party-line on this, and many in it, perhaps even a majority, are not consistent 'non-realists'.

In his *Guardian*-writing persona, Cupitt seems more inclined to entertain the possibility of creating a new religion. At least, he has said that, if we were now to set about creating a religion for ourselves, we should certainly not take on board much of what we already have.

We need new visions of the good life and of the good society, because so many of the old ones are out of date and so many of the new ones are banal. Old-style talk about saints is outworn, but new-style talk about 'role-models' is too shallow. We need to do better: and for that we need to use the religious imagination.

The non-realist Christian today, who is trying to find ways of making old language do new things, is in a situation very familiar to artists. ... old-style dogmatic truth is dead: but religion remains humanly necessary, and we must try to make it out of whatever materials we can get hold of. (Cupitt, 1997)

One useful role for the Sea of Faith is to explore the implications of such an observation. One valuable development has been the growth at the conferences of workshops of all kinds, where people can bring their own ideas out into the open and see what response they provoke, as well as all kinds of activities involving art and meditation.

Those unable to express radical views through Christian forms have turned to other historic religions. Both Iris Murdoch and Don Cupitt have looked to a new form of Christianity influenced by Buddhism. The Sea of Faith may provide a setting where such an interaction can take place.

Outsiders see the Sea of Faith as a chaotic confusion; for insiders, the confusion is a creative ferment. Despite the minimal degree of organization that it has taken on, it remains an anarchic, free-flowing, non-hierarchical network. Hierarchs of all kinds would like to squash it. All the more reason for it to continue to rescue people from isolation, to offer support and encouragement, provoke thinking and renewal. Its life may be limited. That does not matter. Something is not worthless because it does not last forever.

Unitarians and members of the Sea of Faith are both committed to a common task: re-vision, there-envisioning of religious faith. Because this is a world of suffering, tragedy and horror, such a task becomes all the more necessary: in the words of one of the greatest of Unitarian novelists, Herman Melville, to 'spread a rainbow over man's disastrous set of sun'.

Many of the great religions, certainly Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, are profoundly humanistic. A religious humanism is not a contradiction in terms. In fact, the humanistic impulse is immensely strong, and will always re-express itself one way or another, for it is at the heart of the spiritual life. As the Enlightened One said,

the religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. ... there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing. (*Buddhism in Translation* by H.C. Warren, p 121)

In that spirit we are committed to enlarging and deepening the 'story' we tell.

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Questions for discussion

1. How far is it possible for those who hold 'non-realist' views to remain in good conscience members of the traditional churches that demand adherence to the ancient creeds?
2. Can there be such a thing as a 'religious humanism'? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
3. How far can 'religious revision' go? Can we invent a new religion; and, if so, what would it be like?
4. In The Elements of Unitarianism, George Chryssides suggested that the writings of Cupitt and others might be described as 'intellectual gymnastics which are designed to avoid an honest acknowledgement that the God of traditional Judaeo-Christianity simply does not exist' (Chryssides, p104). To what extent is this fair comment?

The author

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