

# *“Bright Living Stars, radiating light across a colour spectrum...”*

Matthew Smith on how Unitarian Congregations can promote understanding in a divided world

Plus:

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A Youtube Channel for the UCA

## Issue 106 Winter Edition 2022





# The Liberal Christian Herald



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## Printed by

Wheatsheaf Print

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## Unitarian Christian Association

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

From the object of the General Assembly:

‘To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.’

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Front Cover Picture: Photo by Andy Vu from Pexels

## Editorial

is, Stephen Lingwood, Kevin Mason, & Jacky Woodman. Your articles really struck a chord.

There’s more good stuff in this edition, thought provoking articles as well as news about some our new charity focus: Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Speaking of new ventures, I’m starting work on setting up a new UCA YouTube channel. This will help us showcase what we’re all about and share ideas, and will include a playlist called Unitarian Christian Journeys. It will be a series of interviews with our members about how they ended up in the UCA. It will demonstrate the amazing diversity of our members, because we’ve come from all sorts of faith backgrounds, and let’s not forget, some of us are Unitarian born! Interviews can happen over zoom and then be edited into a presentation for the playlist. It would be great to have as many UCA members as possible take part in this, and we can add to the playlist as we go along. Please get in touch if you’d like to be involved.

Here’s wishing all readers a happy and meaningful Christmas.

There have been loads of nice comments about the last issue. So, hats off to Rory Castle Jones, Jo James, Lesley Lew-



## DIALOGUE AND INFORMALITY CAN LIGHT THE UNITARIAN SPECTRUM

*Matthew Smith explains how his Unitarian Congregation is promoting mutual understanding in a divided world*

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While some may breathe a sigh of relief at November midterm election results in the United States – with conspiracy theorist candidates who questioned the vote counting of the 2020 Presidential election faring

worse than expected - it remains the case that society in the English-speaking world seems to be becoming increasingly polarised. A report conducted earlier this year by the Policy Institute at Kings College London included a survey that suggested over 50% of citizens feel our nation is becoming more divided on cultural issues. In response, concerned citizens and Unitarians should perhaps be asking the question “How shall we speak with one another across differences?”

The apostle Paul had his own view about what constituted helpful speech. In his Letter to the Colossians we find the following:

*“Let your conversation be always gracious, and never insipid; study how best to talk with each person you meet.”* (Colossians 4:6 – NEB version)

Paul’s primary goal was the furtherance of the Gospel, as he understood it, and to aid other Christians in that mission. It’s noteworthy that he recognised that an identical conversation style would not be appropriate for every person.

The wider implication is that conversation is not just what happens when we open our mouths but that it is something that can be conducted in better and worse ways - that we can improve at it, possibly thereby lessening the scope for needless fractiousness between people. Is the nature of dialogue a neglected field among Unitarians? I feel it is.

Unitarian and Free Christian communities should in my view promote mutual understanding. How does this sit with the primacy of worship? I like to say that “Sunday worship is the most important thing we do together, along with everything else”. All aspects of the life of our communities should complement and round out one another.

Collective worship is predicated upon the creation and holding of a space of ritual and liturgy, howsoever elaborate or plain. The lighting of a

chalice, for example, marks our entry into sacred space and time. As a minister of religion, I uphold the supreme value of such spaces, when run in a liberal and inclusive spirit. Yet we might wish to resist the framing whereby our congregations are for ritualistic space alone. Getting to know someone informally in friendship is often the gateway to that person beginning to recognise an absence in their life that worship might fill. Coffee mornings, for example, are places of informal interaction, and none the worse for that; such gatherings facilitate forms of human interaction that are not generally available during the act of worship itself; here I am chiefly speaking of conversation. Although tea and biscuits after the service permit similar informality for those who don’t need to dash away, often there is a greater degree of time pressure.

As we reflect further on the contrast, it may occur to us that healthy congregations seek to operate within a broad spectrum of ritualistic and informal space creation. If a metaphor helps, perhaps consider that we want our Unitarian and Free Christian communities to be bright living stars, radiating light across a colour spectrum, not collapsing ones! To cast ritual and informality in opposition, as sometimes happens in our internal denominational debate, starts to look like a dangerous and false dichotomy – these modalities should complement one another.

It logically follows that there are vital intermediate spaces on this spectrum. Small engagement groups or study groups – like the Building Your Own Theology programme - may be partly ritualistic, perhaps with an opening chalice lighting and a set format, or they may be very loose in structure. I personally favour a degree of formality to give a sense that the space is held securely for those taking part.

But what of the practice of dialogue? Back in the mid-noughties, I persuaded the Lindsey Press to allow me to commission a successor volume to *Prospects for the Unitarian Movement*. The follow up was called *Being Together: Unitarians Celebrate Congregational Life (2006)*. In that volume, change consultant Peter Hawkins made a passionate plea for fostering a culture of dialogue in our Unitarian

communities, including improving our listening skills. Peter's ideas have stayed with me....

Accordingly, back in 2018, Bury St Edmunds Unitarian congregation launched an outreach project called the Art of Conversation – essentially a pub discussion group. By the time the pandemic hit in March 2020, we had reached the point that our monthly meetings could attract up to eighteen people – mostly non-church members - to wrestle with difficult topics in a respectful way. We met at noon in a pub in Bury St Edmunds on a Sunday in the month when the congregation did not have a service. I would then drive back to Framlingham to conduct the late afternoon service there.

The initiative continues to this day; it is not intended to grow the congregation but is an act of service to the community in the practice of civil dialogue. When the pandemic struck we switched to monthly Zoom meetings, and this remains the case – although we are now keen to resume in-person meeting. I describe Art of Conversation as a 'secular' space but, in the interests of transparency, I also make clear that I am a minister of religion, and that this is the initiative of the congregation.

We use a clear set of written ground rules. We also have an informal rule asking participants to refrain from mentioning living politicians or existing political parties, either here or abroad. Making this announcement often produces a chuckle of recognition; people seem to sense how invoking their

hero or bete noire will most likely be triggering for others, when one can generally make one's point in a different way. We don't tend to choose political themes – but neither of course can these be entirely avoided.

November's session was on the topic "Do you have a maxim you live by?" and elicited quite personal responses from those taking part. Naturally, we operate a confidentiality rule.

I am generally somewhat cautious about introducing 'religious' content into these conversations but, this time around, decided to highlight 1 John 3:18:

*Perfect love banishes fear.* (NEB version)

It is my hope that running an activity like the Art of Conversation is not seen as diminishing the centrality of collective worship but rather brightening that spectrum of congregational activity at the informal end. Paul was right, after all – reflection on how we communicate, and its consequences, should be very much in our minds as people of faith.

*Information about the Art of Conversation project can be found on the website Meetup.com*

*Matthew Smith is Minister to the congregations in Bury St Edmunds and Framlingham, Suffolk*

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## UCA Charity Report

*Cathy Fozard reviews our involvement with former charity, MaaChild, and sets out what we hope to achieve with our new nominated charity Christian Solidarity Worldwide*

One of the objectives of the Unitarian Christian Association is to financially assist individuals or bodies engaged in charitable activities. In recent years the UCA has supported various charities. In 2009 the officers recommended to the membership that we support a charity called 'Embrace the Middle East' (formerly known as 'BibleLands'). We undertook to help sponsor the education of a 14 year old boy from a poor Christian family near Bethlehem. We supported his education until he left school in July 2011. In Autumn 2011, the UCA started working with Christian Aid in a partnership scheme and pledged to raise £5,000 for a maternal health unit in Sierra Leone. This project was match-funded by the UK government and we raised £ 20,000 for this very worthwhile project. In the following years we have continued to support Embrace and Christian Aid whilst also supporting other charities closer to home. For example, A Rocha a Christian environmental charity, the refugees and asylum Conversation Club at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds and Ullet Road Rebels, a football team for asylum seekers in Liverpool.

In 2020 the UCA returned to supporting a charity involved in education. MaaChild was a British based charity that works in Kenya. The charity aims to provide sustainable secondary education for Massai students. The UCA agreed to support the education of a student through the four years of secondary education at a cost of £1500. The UCA continued to support MaaChild during 2021 and in total the UCA raised £2,300 for this charity.

In 2022/2023 the UCA are supporting the charity, 'Christian Solidarity Worldwide'. This charity describes itself as a human rights organisation specialising in freedom of religion or belief. The CSW works in over 20 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East to try and ensure that the right to freedom of religion and belief is upheld and protected. This charity's vision is a world free from persecution where everyone can practise a religion or belief of their choice. CSW does vital work. It advocates for the rights of all peoples to practise their faith, whatever that faith may be, and also the rights of people who profess no religion. The charity supports and advocates for persecuted peoples. The diversity of their work can be seen in many different countries. For example, Christians in India being subjected to attack in their own homes by right wing Hindu fundamentalists; the Uyghur community (predominantly Muslim) who are facing targeted oppression by the Chinese authorities; the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan who are the most institutionally and constitutionally oppressed religious group in the country.

These are just a few examples of the groups supported by CSW. For more information visit their website <https://www.csw.org.uk/home.htm>

The UCA officers would like to start the ball-rolling with our fundraising by sending a donation of £250. If you would like to increase this donation, please make a bank transfer to the UCA account (Sort code 20-82-13, Acc.no. 93680363) with the reference CSW or send a cheque payable to the UCA, to 20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow SK9 2LU .

Thank you for your support.

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## The Christmas stories

*Alex Bradley on how he approaches the Christian Christmas narratives.*



Are you looking forward to Christmas? I know I am, although not perhaps for precisely the same reasons as some others. Christmas can be a time of joy, companionship and laughter. It can be great fun to exchange presents, and having a meal with friends or loved ones is one of those pleasures. It can also be a time when people can feel left out, isolated and lonely. Although I enjoy the company of others, I am usually quite happy with my own company but as someone who lived as a single man without close family for a number of years, I was very fortunate to have various invitations to spend Christmas Day with congregational members –kindnesses for which I shall always be grateful.

Whatever opinions we may hold on the historicity or otherwise of the nativity stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the narratives have captured our imaginations down the centuries, so that many people who would otherwise never enter a church will turn up for a candlelit carol service (although there might be an additional incentive if seasonal refreshments of mulled wine and mince pies are offered afterwards!) In this very limited sense, Christmas is a religious festival, albeit one we might describe as a manifestation of cultural Christianity'. In that sense, I suppose I, too, am a cultural Christian. However, I seek, whether successfully or otherwise, to be something more.

For those of us who seek to follow the way of Jesus, whatever religious label we may give ourselves, there has to be a deeper understanding of what the Christmas stories mean. Countless words have been written about their significance but ultimately each person must judge for him or herself. Not all Christians celebrate Christmas of course: some even reject it outright as a 'pagan' feast.

If it is true, as seems likely, that the festival incorporated some non-Christian elements, that, for me at least, is an argument in its favour: namely, that the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, embraces and include elements of truth and light from wherever such truths may come. All the life that is in nature (and

creatures, as part of the divine Creation) comes together to celebrate the divine revelation which Jesus brought in his life and teaching.

The shepherds were ordinary working men, who would have had little or no education, and would only have had a very basic understanding of their faith. The contrast with the magi, the 'wise men' could hardly be starker. Yet here in the composite picture of these accounts (Matthew mentions only the magi, Luke only the shepherds), we see simplicity and wisdom joining together to share their amazement and joy at the new birth. Rich and poor come as one to welcome the child. In the Apostle Paul's words in I Corinthians to his fellow Christians, "... brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." (1.26 - RSV). His wording is important: most of them would have been fairly uneducated but some, albeit perhaps only a very few, could have been 'wise'. Paul's words may be a riposte to some claiming special 'knowledge' or 'wisdom' in the Corinthian church, but his words encapsulate the true wisdom, which is both simple (nothing could be simpler than words like 'love one another because love is from God': I John 4.7)) but also infinitely subtle. There is a wisdom whose depth and height is beyond measure, a wisdom that, Jesus says, indicates all her children (Luke 7.35- RSV). Paul himself enthusiastically exclaims: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11.33 – New RSV) The Good News of Jesus is simple but not simplistic. True simplicity and true wisdom meet together in the shepherds and the magi, symbolizing the infinite depths of the spiritual life.

Apart from the humans who venerated the Christ child, where are the animals? The ox and the ass do not appear in either Matthew or Luke, but they were included in Christian art depicting the Nativity from very early times. It is generally believed that they were included as a *ex post facto* reference to the text in the prophet Isaiah: "The ass knows his owner and the ox his master's crib" (1.3- RSV) - the belief that the prophet was referring to the birth of Jesus. To concentrate on the historicity or otherwise of their presence at the birth, is (in my opinion) to entirely miss the point. All sentient beings, not just human beings, share in the beauty and glory that is God's creation. All life, rich and poor, powerful and weak, human and animal, old and young, is called to worship God and to love in words and in actions. The Bible is at the heart of the Christian spiritual life but we are not confined to its letter alone but rather we are set free to find the true wisdom that animates it, the spirit that gives it life.

It is possible to live as a 'good Christian' and not celebrate Christmas, as some have done, and still do, right up to the present day, although, sad to say, some (e.g., in the Commonwealth period in England) have sometimes ventured into intolerant fanaticism and banned all Christmas celebrations. Even Unitarians up to around the 19<sup>th</sup> century were somewhat ambivalent about the feast. However, I believe that Christmas provides a vital key to the heart of the Christian spiritual life.

The enduring attraction of the biblical stories lies in the fact that they speak of the great archetypal themes: the message of peace and goodwill to all, and the hope of good to come. They tell the story of the triumph of good over evil and wickedness in high places brought to naught. They tell of journeys, dreams and revelations, all of which lead to the heart of all that is good and true and real in the universe. They tell us of an epiphany, a manifestation of the divine, and in that manifestation, we can find both our meaning and our peace. The eternal word, the *logos*, the primal word, becomes visible in the simple birth of a child. The festivities, and the carols we sing, celebrate that truth in all its magnificent simplicity. Happy Christmas, and may peace be with us and in us!

*Rev Alex Bradley is a Unitarian Minister living in Wales*

## Classic Unitarian Christians

*The first of a new series featuring writing from notable Unitarians Christians of the past. In Joe Hooper shares his pleasure at discovering the works of Minot Judson Savage.*

The following article consists of a sermon justifying Unitarian Christianity by the Rev. Minot Judson Savage D.D. (1841 -1918), an eminent American minister of his day and still highly regarded by those who know his work.

Written for delivery from the pulpit, this condensed and edited version has been adapted to a style more fitting for the armchair.

Savage was a graduate of Bangor Theological Seminary in his native Maine and served originally as a Congregationalist pastor. Later he became a Unitarian and ministered in Chicago, Boston and New York. The value of his contribution to theological thinking in the United States was recognised by the award of an honorary doctorate by Harvard University in 1896, just a year before the present sermon was written.

JKH 2022

## WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY? By Minot Judson Savage



If you were to judge by the claims of the mainstream Churches, you would suppose that it had been generally recognised that the world had fallen from perfection, and that Christianity, with its plan of salvation fully defined and outlined, was suddenly revealed, complete with creeds, practices and ceremonies.

Let us enquire then, into the facts, facts which are not questioned by anybody who is simply looking to find out what is true.

When we do so, we discover that Christianity was evolving, growing year after year, century after century, employing material from both pagan and Christian sources, and that it is changing still.

And as of first importance I wish you to note the alterations of belief concerning the nature and the authority of Jesus himself.

When Paul was writing his epistles, only one single thing was necessary in order for a Jew to become a Christian. Jews believed that a Messiah was to come; Christians believed that he *had* come. Paul preached that Jesus was the Messiah; and accepting this as true is what constituted a Christian.

But the development of Christian thought about the nature and authority of Jesus had only just begun. Christianity was born at a time when it was the commonest thing in the world to deify men. Greek and Roman hero after hero had been deified by the popular imagination. There was no god in all the Roman Empire so widely worshipped during the reign of Augustus as was the Emperor Augustus himself. His image, his shrine, lined all the roads and highways, and was found in the peasants' cottages throughout the Roman Empire.

But deity was not widely ascribed to Jesus in the first century. First came the thought that he was the Messiah.

The next step was the belief that he was the second Adam; divinely appointed to be the head of a new and spiritual order of humanity.

After that, Jesus came to be regarded as a pre-existent being, the Lord from heaven, first-born among God's creatures; but a creature still, and infinitely removed from the divine Source of all.

Then the final step was taken, and Jesus was elevated to the position of sharing the divine nature equally with the Father. But how long did it take this process to culminate?

The theory of the deity of Jesus was not promulgated as an orthodox doctrine until the year 325 at the Council of Nicaea, simply on the basis of philosophical speculation. And the bishops fought over it not in a very Christian temper, until the Emperor Constantine, one of the most treacherous, murderous emperors that ever lived, threw in the weight of his imperial decision against Arius and in favour of Athanasius. Thus the Nicene Creed was born, after a struggle of three hundred years and more.



But now a few facts concerning the *real* teaching of Jesus and his apostles, for if it be necessary to believe the Nicene, the Apostles' or the Athanasian Creed to be a Christian, then not one of the apostles was a Christian – and neither was Jesus himself!

Jesus never said anything about the 'Fall of Man'. He says nothing about the doctrine of the Atonement. He says nothing about the Trinity. There is hardly anything which, according to these three influential creeds is essential to Christianity, which Jesus anywhere appears to care about.

So what are the essentials of Christianity for the modern world?

The rituals and ceremonies, are they essential? Almost every single one is pagan in origin and hundreds of years older than Christianity. Is it the doctrines? Hardly one of the doctrines is unique to Christianity. You find a Trinity in Egypt, in India, and all over the ancient world. You find the Virgin Birth in almost every one of the great pagan religions.

What is it, then, that Christianity brought to the world, which we still cling to today, and are not willing to let go?

It is Jesus; the ideal of his life, his character, his spirit, his teaching. The spiritual attitude of Jesus, his love of God, his human sympathy, his tenderness, his sacrifice, his willingness to help; these are the essentials of Christianity, and these alone.

The former doctrines are destined to pass away. The thing we put our faith in today, and are going to rely upon more and more, is the scientific revelation of the ascertainable nature of the universe. This will furnish the material out of which we are to construct our theological theories.

The Christianity of the future, then, is to be made up of two elements : commitment to the pursuit of truth, whatever the source; and the example of the spiritual attitude of Jesus towards God and mankind. There can be nothing finer or more noble than a combination like that.

Finally, let us take note of the solemn utterance of Jesus, if he be correctly reported, on the subject of the conditions of admission into heaven.

Here is the dramatic scene of judgment, the 'sheep' on his right hand destined for eternal felicity, the 'goats' on his left destined for outer darkness. And what does he say to those on his right hand, that he calls the blessed of his Father and who are to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world?

Does he examine them as to what they have believed? Not one single syllable about belief in any doctrine whatsoever. Nothing about Predestination; nothing about the Bible; nothing about the Trinity; nothing about his own nature or authority. The test is simply whether they have been good. That is all! Have they tried to lessen the sum of human misery? Have they cared for their fellow-men? Not a word about ceremony, about membership of a Church; not a word about priesthood; nothing at all about the things that all the Churches today are still declaring to be absolutely essential to Christianity - not one word about any of them!

Those who have tried to be good and help others are the ones to whom the door of eternal felicity opens in welcome.

So let me repeat here, that according to the standards of the larger Churches not a single one of the apostles was a Christian, and Jesus was not a Christian. And although they all say that we Unitarians are not Christians, I verily believe that if Jesus were here today, he would find himself at home in our simple gatherings where we teach just what he taught – the love of God and the service of mankind as the great essentials of all true religion.

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## A Message from the Treasurer

Just a gentle reminder that subscriptions for 2023 are due from the beginning of January. It is easy to pay by bank transfer. Bank details are:-Sort code 20-82-13, Account number 93680363. The subscription rate has not changed, £12.00 Full membership, £18.00 Joint membership, £8.00 concessions. Cheques can be sent to Mrs C Fozard, 20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, SK9 2LU. If you pay by standing order it does not



matter what date in the year the subscription is paid. Please do consider setting up a standing order as it means I don't have to send out reminders. Don't forget that if you are a UK taxpayer you are able to Gift Aid your subscription. This means the UCA will receive another £3 from the UK government for each £12.00 subscription. The subscriptions the UCA receives from the membership are used to support the work of the UCA. The Liberal Christian Herald is sent free to all members either as a hard copy or electronically. The cost of postage and printing has risen dramatically recently. Please consider receiving the Herald electronically if at all possible.

Thank you all for your wonderful support. The UCA only exists because of the membership. *Catherine Fozard, UCA Treasurer*



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## UCA Worship is One Year Old—and Going Strong! Says Sheena Gabriel



As a child brought up in a devoutly religious household, I attended church 3 times a day, including an evening service at 6pm (yes it was over-kill!) It's been decades since I regularly attended evening services, but here I am once more, favouring Sunday worship over the telly.

Having adapted to Zoom services during covid, Francis Elliot Wright first had the vision for weekly online worship and started the ball rolling in Advent 2021. Since stepping down as minister of a Unitarian congregation, UCA worship has provided me and my husband Rob, with a new spiritual community.

I've enjoyed receiving the 'gift' of Sunday worship from a variety of service leaders, within the comfort of my own home. And leading UCA worship has felt freeing; I can use God language, talk about Jesus, read from the Bible, and say the 'Lord's prayer' without feeling self-conscious, or needing to justify it. That's not to say I don't value leading services for more theologically eclectic Unitarian congregations - I do.

I see UCA worship as complementing, not competing, with other forms of Unitarian worship. We don't apologise for our Christian beliefs, but neither do we force them on others. Whilst our services are led by UCA members, between us we hold many viewpoints – and our styles of worship differ: we've enjoyed traditional hymns and rock anthems, contemplative silence and creative rituals (adapted for online), theologically probing sermons and heart-felt stories – all with the overarching desire to create communal sacred space, through which we can connect with the Divine according to our understanding; to learn from each other, grow in our faith, pray together, share joys and sorrows. The times of fellowship afterwards, allow us to bond with people we'd not easily get to meet in person - moments of deep sharing and theological grappling, alongside light-hearted chat.

Some of our number regularly attend other places of worship – for others, the UCA is their only congregation. I think this venture is worth celebrating, and want to thank Francis, the worship leaders, those who help with the tech, and all who show up - sometimes after a busy day at church – to take part in this collaborate venture. I've recently been co-opted as a UCA officer and taken on responsibility for coordinating online worship. I'd encourage those who've not yet zoomed in, to give it a try. And if you'd be willing to lead an occasional service or help with the Zoom - I'd love to hear from you:

revsheenagaibrel@gmail.com

## Two Cheers for Puritans — Bruce Bebington



Puritans have a bad reputation from history and often people are named pejoratively as Puritan. They are seen, at best, as killjoys and, at worst, as behavioural tyrants imposing their dour beliefs on a

resistant population. This article will suggest that their reputation is largely undeserved and, actually, a lot can be learnt from the issues that they tried to address and their responses for today.

Firstly, it has to be established that one cannot look on any historical group as one might a modern religious or political group if writing an editorial for the Times or the Guardian. In such an editorial, the group is judged against the beliefs held by that newspaper on current issues. Historical groups have to be judged, if at all, by the standards of the time. For example, dissenting churches sometimes make a great rumpus about the ejection of clergy from their livings in 1662, being those clergy who lost their livings for not accepting the Act of Uniformity and the Book of Common Prayer. However, clergy of the opposing view were regularly ejected from their livings during the political supremacy of Puritanism in the inter-regnum between 1645 and 1660. [Certainly, such an action would be condemned uniformly today.]

Apart from academic interest, the primary purpose of studying the incidence of Puritanism is to see what it can tell us about human nature, its connection with the spiritual world and any common religious themes which resonate today.

The starting point has to be a definition of Puritanism. It is a common spiritual and cultural approach that pertains to a group of lay and clerical peoples broadly between 1560 and 1680 or arguably 1700 in England and Wales for our

purposes. This approach will, hopefully, be clarified later in this article. Meanwhile, the names of Puritans reel off the tongue: Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, John Davenant, Samuel Ward, John Biddle, John Owen, Cornelius Burgess.....

At the heart of Puritan belief was a study of the bible and, especially, the New Testament then available freely in English. This study was conducted not to establish the historical record or mark great literature although, undoubtedly, the bible is a source for both attributes to a large degree. The bible was read not even to slavishly follow its code for personal and social behaviour. It was read to provide an understanding of the pathway to leading a life dedicated to God and to understand God's relationship with their world, and indeed, the present day. Their belief is that there is no profound religion without a holy text and, so, it has proved. The Christians have the bible, the Moslems the Quran, the Hindus the Upanishads....

The relevance of purity as part of the word, Puritanism, is the fact that the Puritans were trying to make religion pure or stripped of add-ons or superficialities. Thus, they had an emphasis on plain churches and, for example, holy communions at open tables rather than tables behind railings. Their purity goes further than the removal of superficialities, Puritans went to the text of the scriptures to find out if religious practices were correct as handed down from mediaeval times. Thus, some churches had pictures of God as an old man with a white beard but the bible clearly says that God is invisible to the human eye. Puritans therefore condemned these pictures of God for one example.

Some Puritans' mistake was to consider that the attributes of furniture, practices and symbols in churches were necessarily condemnable because they were unnecessary to worship or had no scriptural authority. These disliked attributes may well have assisted people to good worship as, in some way, they helped a congregant to engage with

the service. Nevertheless, their approach to church lay-out and the conduct of worship has a lot of attraction to many worshippers today. To be fair and on the other hand, many Puritans did have toleration of other forms of Christian worship different to their own.

The Puritans approached their task of communication with God in a different way to many other Christians. Nevertheless, they shared a belief in the centrality of the person and teachings of Jesus. They were partly concerned about the adornment of churches. For example, they believed that the presence of railings before the communion table constituted a barrier between the communicants and their act of worship. They also took exception to the practice of kneeling at these rails during the act of holy communion saying that the communicants were thus kneeling to a table rather than carrying out the purpose of the sacrament which is to remember the significance of Jesus' sayings at the last supper before his crucifixion.

They further reviewed the practices of the church. They looked disapprovingly on the catholic tradition of confession by a person going into a booth with a priest in the adjoining booth. The penitents confess their sins and then the priest absolves them of the confessed sins. For many Puritans, this act was not a true confession always because of its repetitive nature. For others, the presence of the priest was an unnecessary intermediary between the confessing human and God.

No symbol caused the Puritans more offence than the erection of crosses either in churches or in public spaces. The objection was that the onlookers would reverence the cross rather than the significance of the crucifixion in the practice and theory of Christian faith. Indeed, they held public meetings of thanks as crosses were dismantled from market places.

In contrast, the Puritans concentrated on the importance of preaching. Some did not attend their

parish church in order to hear a "good" preacher elsewhere and would travel many miles for this purpose.

This practice was supplemented by an action called gadding which consisted of going to one service on Sunday, probably at one's local parish church and then going to hear another service at another church and, if possible, yet another during the same Sunday. [Gadding was occasionally prosecuted in the Anglican church courts as church law required you to attend only at your own parish. Prosecution was particularly likely where the gadding did not include the practitioner including his/her parish in the Sunday travels.]

Today, we are free to attend what church meets our spiritual needs or other desires on Sundays. Yet, this behaviour can still bring criticism from the hierarchy at the church which regards the itinerant worshipper as rightly being part of its weekly congregation.

A further practice was the holding of fasts. These fasts were not the traditional fasts of the catholic church before Easter or Christmas but specially held fasts declared by Puritan clerics at centres throughout the country. The participants would abstain from food before going and arrive early in the morning. The event would last up to nine hours and consist of biblical readings, chanting psalms and sermons. There could be up to six sermons. [The fasts were sometimes the subject of prosecutions in the clerical courts of the organisers primarily because they were considered as unauthorised acts of worship.]

Today, most denominations hold retreats although participants are not asked usually to refrain from eating before arrival. LDPA organise one such retreat called FUSE.

The biggest charge against Puritans is that of iconoclasm. The charge sheet reads that they destroyed stained glass windows and statues of priceless artistic merit because they did not like the subject matter in the art works; for example, a



depiction of God to which they had the objections previously written. The art lovers say that these beautiful works are now lost to our enjoyment and that of future generations. It is impossible to defend the iconoclasm, especially since the puritans had no objection to such works being displayed in private houses, palaces or stately homes. The works could simply have been removed from the churches and placed elsewhere.

Nevertheless, nowadays there remains a quandary as to what happens to church adornments which served the congregation at their installation but which, later congregations feel to be inappropriate to their spiritual intents in worship. This quandary echoes that one which the iconoclasts faced. Usually, these unwanted artworks cannot be sent to a place for public display such as a museum. Congregations face a choice of retaining the artworks in the building for their artistic merit or historical record despite their present irrelevance to worship or putting these objects in a skip.

Aside from the formalities of worship, Puritans were about changing a person so that they became morally regenerated. The objections to the May Pole or Christmas celebrations were not just to the events but a belief that the participants were showing a worldliness in their celebrations which was divorced from leading a godly life. It must be written that these celebrations sometimes degenerated into lasciviousness, drunkenness and lawlessness. Many non-Puritan people joined in condemning these aspects of the celebrations.

However, for the Puritans, the objection was that the celebrations detracted from leading a godly life. Their definition of the purpose of the godly life cannot be separated usually from the theological writings of Calvin. These thoughts were the predominant theology of Puritans and it is essential to look at part of Calvin's beliefs and thus grasp the underlying problem that Puritans were trying to address in their objection to these celebrations.

No part of Calvin's theology was more central to

most Puritan thinking than the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine says that *"sin so affects human nature that it is unable to exercise faith in Christ by its own nature. While people are said to retain will, in that they can wilfully sin, they are unable to avoid sinning because of the corruption of human nature. However, God predestines some to be saved and others are predestined to eternal damnation. The choice by God is unconditional and not based on any characteristic or action on behalf of the person concerned"*. [per wikipedia]

One may ask the consistency between this doctrine and the sayings of Jesus who consistently calls on people to repent of their sins in the gospels. The question arises what is the point of so repenting if the repenting person has been chosen by God already to go to heaven or hell and so chosen unconditionally. In Calvin's view, there is biblical authority for the doctrine of predestination in passages from the writings of St Paul.. Consider the passage below:

*"For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you because our message of the gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the holy spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake"*.

I Thessalonians C1 V4 & 5"

Calvin is looking at the identification of Christians in the church which he founded, commonly called the Reformed Church. These Christians not only had to be morally regenerated. They had to be "chosen" as Paul writes above. The act of being chosen implies that outsiders can identify the church members as separate. Such Christians have to demonstrate their separateness in their behaviour and religious observance to outsiders. The behaviour and social approach of Puritans can be explained against the need for such demonstration.

The Calvinist doctrine of predestination is incompatible with this publication's beliefs and also the writer's. However, Calvin is asking an important

question although he has come up with the wrong answer. There should be some characteristics that people gain from attending a Unitarian and/or Free Christian church which distinguishes these people from others. Albeit, the distinction may not be evident most of the time.

It is suggested that this distinction is certainly not that they confirm God's election of them by such attendance. Rather, there are other tangible and intangible gains to themselves from this attendance.

One gain should be that they improve their ability to make a positive contribution to society.

Another gain is a deeper understanding of their faith which can be defined as their encounter with theology and knowledge. This gain can be described as a cognitive gain. There is thirdly a spiritual gain which comes from a better encounter with the divine presence both within themselves and, without, in the world.

Christianity requires theology as, without it, there can be only a very limited cognitive gain. Theologians have to raise the important questions that underly the faith. They also should provide answers. It is suggested that Puritans raised such questions and came up with thought provoking answers, some of which do not seem right to most Christians today. As such, these people were theological giants.

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### **From the UCA Blogosphere....**

#### **A Space of Possibility**

Jo James

Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, Minister's Blog.

<https://spaceofpossibility.wordpress.com/>

Latest Post: Hands full of blood, November 18th

#### **Bob Janis-Dillon**

Bob Janis-Dillon

*"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."* -Walt Whitman

<https://spiritbob.com/>

Latest Post: New Book Out, November 15th

#### **Caute**

Andrew Brown

Making Footprints Not Blueprints

<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/>

#### **Didymus**

Lucy Harris - Editor

Unitarians in Ringwood

<https://ringwoodunitarians.blogspot.com/>

Latest Post: The Teaching of Jesus, The Teachings About Jesus, or Something Else...October 9th

#### **Reignite**

Stephen Lingwood

Seeking paradise in Cardiff

<http://reigniteuk.blogspot.com/>

Latest Post: A Tale of Two Protests April 7th

#### **Rev. Robin Hanford**

Personal website of Robin Hanford, Unitarian Minister

<https://hanford.me.uk/>

Latest Post: Mental Health and Social Stigma: The

Gerasene Demoniac, June 19th

#### **Unitarian Christian Ark**

Francis Elliot-Wright

UCA Officer & Current Ministry Student

<http://unitarianchristianark.blogspot.com/>

Latest Post: Can We Look Them In The Eye? October 7th

#### **Unitarian Musings from North Wales**

Ant Howe

A Unitarian Minister reflecting on life, spirituality and simpler living

<https://walesunitarianmusing.wordpress.com/>

Latest Post: Positive about heaven on earth – a sermon shared with Knutsford Unitarians

#### **Unitarian Thoughts**

Kevin Mason

<https://unitarianthoughts.wordpress.com/>

Latest Post: Are Visions Real? March 29th

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## Deeper Intercessory Prayer



### Peter Brown reflects on a new/old method of healing and prayer

In the past 30 years discoveries in both the studies of the nature of matter and of the human body have enabled us to gain a far better understanding of the healing techniques used by traditional healers of cultures far removed from our own.

Studies of the methods of many natural healers finds that recent scientific studies mentioned above enable us to now not only understand how some of their more straightforward healings work, but also enable us to even begin to share in their practice. It seems to me that neither religious nor theological matters are involved in this process since it simply provides an alternative method of prayer.

The prayer that I speak of here is that the healer does not enter into any form of dialogue with either a god or spirit entity since the energy used is that which is able to emanate from the heart and the prayer is that the healer visualises that the prayer has already been granted. So rather than praying that a sick person be made better, the prayer is thanks and gratitude for the fact that they are now healthy.

In the field of medicine it has been discovered that the human heart of which we have a mental model as being just a pump, does in fact contain a multitude of cells similar to those found in our brain. It is now thought that our understanding of the full effect of these cells is a subject which requires a great deal more investigation. It has been known for some time that the small electrical impulses given off by body are far higher in region of the heart than in the region of the brain. It is now being considered that the function of the newly identified cells may be of very great importance.

It is very important to note that this not any form of positive thinking. In fact it is best if the thinking analytical brain is kept silent. The prayer is the use of the heart if, as one might say, telling a different story to the one that is currently playing out. It is here that perhaps it should be reminded that atoms are suspended in the creative energy field of the universe and usually directly create that which they have been 'instructed' to create and so in physical

terms are neutral as to what is created. Currently they are following the direction they have received by, the creative spirit in the construction of our world. However the study of these healing methods finds that the atoms will also accept instruction from us provided that we speak in their language. So it is not the language of words and mentally constructions, but the language of the heart providing as it were an alternative screenplay. It is important that during the use of the method that I outline the neutrality of our world and its constituents must be obeyed such that a sickness, such as malaria is neither good nor bad, it is just 'doing what it does' and must not be subject to judgement.

In order to use this new/old method preparation is helpful and probably vital to success. First in order to improve the brain and heart coordination of their respective neurons the following exercise should be carried out. Place a hand upon your heart and while doing this for about three minutes fill your heart and mind with feelings of appreciation, care, gratitude, compassion. Repeat at least twice a day and after three days the connection will be much stronger. With this great warmth of feeling the the heart then picture the alternative storyline that is desired; see it; feel it; smell it; live it.

My current experience is that this very powerful and after my first attempt so successful, that I have to hastily modify my desired 'wish'. It may be that as I have a very good imagination this works for me and has achieved far more concrete results than with my previous prayers that I now find it almost hard to 'go back' as it were.

#### NOTICE OF AGM

**Saturday March 18 2023**

**Great Meeting, Baines Lane, Hinckley LE10 1PP.**

The meeting will begin at 12 noon with lunch followed by Worship at 1pm. The AGM will start at 2pm followed by a presentation and afternoon tea.

If you are able to join us in person , please email [cathy@fozard.com](mailto:cathy@fozard.com) or call 01625 533110 , for catering purposes.

There may be a possibility to join us on Zoom . We will let you know by email .



## LUCY HARRIS reflects on how her faith journey has led her to the UCA



"When I first became aware of Unitarian congregations it was after having lived for 20 years in a personally devout solitude. I rejected the traditional foundational beliefs of the CofE at 18, having been confirmed as early as 12. Church meant a lot to me; but after deep searching at 18, Jesus didn't. Twenty years later, having lived life heuristically (a lovely word I was introduced to in my engineering degree), by trial and error, living by observing the patterns revealed by the divine in the rub-a-dub-dub of everyday life, I was feeling a bit lonely in my life of devotion (despite a truly happy and blessed family life, and a successful career - all was going very well for me). I loved cathedrals, and I desired a safe space in which to worship in community. A community where I didn't have to lie or hide. What I didn't want or need at the time, was the heritage of the Bible. I was a typical "ABC" Unitarian - Anything But Christian. It was delightful to find a community that values scriptures from all traditions, and through the reading to which I was led by snippets in Unitarian circles I spent quite a time looking at Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Islam, and then as the years went past I gradually picked up with Kabbalah and Judaism. ABC.

And then I became aware of the Unitarian Christian Association. Not yet mature in my understanding of the movement I was perturbed. I read and heard little comments such as "*oh yes they are the ones who seem intent on re-creating church inside the movement*". "Not able to let go of the past." The last thing I wanted was for the lovely space I had begun to settle into to be taken over again by people holding beliefs I couldn't subscribe to. Knowing that the best way to steer groups is from the inside, I decided to join. I saw myself as potentially a moderating voice, should the UCA become too strident in "*wanting to re-create church*". I kept my motives to myself and started to receive the regular mailings. Years went by and my personal trajectory naturally extended from a look at Judaism to a revisiting of who the Jesus character might be, situated against a Jewish backdrop. In parallel, I saw that the prime ambition of the UCA seemed to be to ensure that the riches of the Christian heritage were not irredeemably jettisoned from the Unitarian movement.

You can see where I am going with this. I am reminded of the old joke: "*When I was 14 my father was bigoted, narrow minded, reactionary, inflexible and difficult to live with. Now I have reached 21 I am amazed at how much he has opened up, broadened his outlook and indeed how much he has learned, in the intervening seven years!*" I now find that the worship space of the UCA is one of the few places I can comfortably be in, where I do not have to apologise for my use of the word "God", nor justify myself for using it. What a relief to find a close circle of people sitting as close to the fire as I myself like to. Being a Unitarian no longer feels like waving across a big empty space to another traveller passing on a different trajectory, a long distance from me. And Jesus? Well, for me it's not "Jesus" as such, but the stories of the Jesus character, the shared narratives and contexts, the Old Testament prophets, the radical way of rethinking religion that Jesus represents. As I saw recently on Twitter, by a chap named Steve Chalke, a founder of "Oasis" and a Canon at Southwark Cathedral: "*One of the core themes of Jesus' message: 'Stop using the law, religion and God as an excuse to be awful to each other.' If he was right, and you come across any version of any religion that requires you to stigmatise, ostracise or exclude others in the name of its God, it's a fake.*" At the moment, I want to focus on the UCA as my homing ground within the Unitarian constellation. But who knows what will happen next? Look how far I have travelled since 1998, my ABC time!



Attendees enjoying the sunshine at the Quiet Day. Photo by Cathy Fozard.

A Quiet Day was held, at Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow on 20th August 2022. The Unitarian Christian Association worked in collaboration with the World Community of Christian Meditation to organise the day. Our thanks go to Jeff Gould and the Dean Row congregation for hosting the event.

[unitarianchristian.org.uk](http://unitarianchristian.org.uk)

[facebook.com/unitarianchristianassociation](https://facebook.com/unitarianchristianassociation)

Join us for online worship and fellowship each Sunday at 6pm.

Go to [unitarianchristian.org.uk/liveworship](http://unitarianchristian.org.uk/liveworship)