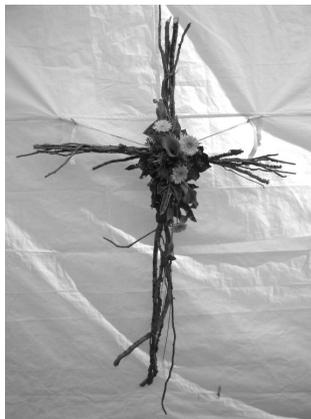


UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN HERALD

THE JOURNAL OF THE UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION — No. 60

✠ WINTER 2005 ✠



UPHOLDING THE LIBERAL CHRISTIAN TRADITION?

Chris Wilson

THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY: WILL IT BE THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE?

Elek Rezi

UNITARIAN RECONSTRUCTION: ARGUMENT FOR A COLLOQUIUM

Joe Bord

PLUS NEWS, REVIEWS AND POEMS



Editor: The Revd Andrew James Brown MA

The Manse, 5 Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW

Email: mail@revajbrown.demon.co.uk Tel: 01223 576952

EDITORIAL

My first editorial inevitably begins by thanking the outgoing editor Paul Travis. We are all very grateful for the many hours of work he put into the task over the past two years; work which we have all greatly appreciated. We are also delighted to see him recovering well from his recent illness and send him and his wife our love and best wishes.

Every editor inevitably brings with them some basic aim for the future and my own is simple. I hope to assist the restoration of our individual and collective confidence that the Unitarian/liberal Christian tradition remains a beautiful, reasonable and viable way of faith in the twenty-first century. I know you share this belief too. However, it is also clear that many of us are feeling alone and marginalized, especially as we continue to see how our tradition is constantly being attacked, not only within the contemporary Unitarian movement, but also within mainstream culture. I think the UCA and *The Herald* can help us respond to this in two positive ways. The first is by simply encouraging us to continue to worship God and serve our neighbours as Jesus taught us – living out our Unitarian/liberal Christian faith in our local communities. However, as we do this, we must not be seduced into merely *restating* our inherited tradition in the language of our forebears (not matter how much we revere them) but we must instead find ways to begin actively to re-explore and reshape it for our own generation so that we can speak clearly and relevantly to our own complex age. So the second way the UCA and *The Herald* can help is by encouraging the development of a range of contemporary Unitarian Christian theologies which can be used to *persuade* people of the truth and reasonableness of our basic claims. As Joe Bord and I say in an article in this edition of *The Herald*, “to seek to persuade and convince is *not* the imposition of a creed.” I cannot stress this point strongly enough.

All of the major articles in this edition of the Herald pick up on this basic theme of the re-exploration and reshaping of our tradition for our own age.

In essence the task ahead of us is simple – it is nothing less than the spiritual and intellectual *renaissance* of our faith. As we prepare for the season of Advent and Christmas what greater and more rewarding task is there than to ensure we are able to continue to preach the liberal Christian Gospel into the twenty-first century and beyond?



UPHOLDING THE LIBERAL CHRISTIAN TRADITION?
Chris Wilson (Reprinted from *The Norfolk Unitarian*)

I've been following with interest the debate in the *'Inquirer'* regarding the IGA Object and, in particular, its reference to '*upholding the liberal Christian tradition*'. I have been deeply saddened by those who would remove this reference from our Object. I am equally heartened by the majority of correspondents who would oppose such a move. Whilst, I have resisted – so far – the temptation to write to the *'Inquirer'* on this, I would like to share some thoughts within the *'Norfolk Unitarian'* on this topic. But I guess I should first declare an interest, as the Chair of the *Unitarian Christian Association*. However, for me, my Unitarianism and liberal Christianity are indivisible. One flows from and informs the other, no conflict – just different aspects of the same faith.

I am continually surprised that some desire to counterpose the words *Unitarian* and *Free Christian*, for they actually describe the *same* tradition - one not seen as historically divisible. The first word '*Unitarian*' defined a doctrinal position (the unity of God and by implication the humanity of Christ), whilst '*Free Christian*' was a way of saying, *we who follow the example of Jesus but who reject hierarchy and creeds*. Of course, today, *Free Christian* suggests to some the narrow sectarianism of say, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ireland, and so the term *Liberal Christian* is favoured.

Now all this is very interesting, but not in fact directly relevant to the *'Inquirer'* debate. For the objection, we should remember, was not to the terms *Free* or *Liberal Christian*, but rather to the '*upholding of the liberal Christian tradition*'. This it seems to me is far more serious, divisive - and contentious – and for that reason, I have been reluctant to fuel at a national level that very discussion. I simply do not understand how one can object to a *tradition* (that is a way of thinking and acting) when that same tradition has facilitated the very pluralism which our religious movement now enjoys. If there is a theological equivalent of matricide this surely is it! What then is the liberal Christian tradition?

It is one which has affirmed, and still does affirm, the sovereignty of conscience in matters of faith; which upholds intelligent Biblical study and criticism; which rejects literalist understanding of scripture; which challenges authority whenever the same is used to oppress; which see the image of God in all of humanity's rich diversity; which opposes still discrimination on grounds of race or age or gender or sexuality. In other words it is *our* tradition – rooted in *dissenting* Christianity but reaching out beyond it.

Of course, it also affirms the validity of the example, teaching and ministry of Jesus – as one who offered, and showed the path to God. But it does and has not made such claims exclusively, but rather has always accepted that there are other expressions and examples of that same call to serve.

So again, to call for the removal of ‘*upholding the liberal Christian tradition*’ is to betray our past, to squander and to reject our heritage. It would be to collapse into – or should that be to return? – to *dogmatism*, to authority, to exclusive notions of truth. Now, this *new* dogma may be humanist or something else, but dogma it would still be – no better than the conservative, narrow, oppressive and judgemental interpretations of Christianity that our forebears worked and sacrificed so hard to overcome. It would be the equivalent of forging chains, whilst chanting platitudes.

So friends, in the end it is simple. To uphold the liberal Christian tradition *is* to uphold those values and virtues which gave birth to our movement in the first place – and which sustain it still. To deny that tradition *is* to deny freedom, reason, tolerance, pluralism and above all individual conscience. It represents an ill-judged and ill-informed confusion of *method* with *doctrine*; for it never was the case that upholding such a tradition requires you define yourself as a Christian. In fact, the opposite is true – it is that the liberal Christian tradition has encouraged and supported the emergence of other identities within our movement.

Oh, for some freedom, reason, tolerance and reflection here! ‘Baby and bathwater’ comes to mind...

Chris Wilson is the Chairman of the UCA, Associate Minister of the Eastern Union of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and a chaplain and lecturer at Cambridge Regional College.



UNITARIAN RECONSTRUCTION: AN ARGUMENT FOR A COLLOQUIUM

Joe Bord with Andrew Brown

There can be little doubt about the pronounced nature of the intellectual crisis facing the Unitarian movement and the need for serious reconstruction. The erosion of the Christian identity of British Unitarianism by pagans, naturalists, humanists and others is simply a symptom of the decline of a morally and philosophically compelling theology. To seek to persuade and convince is *not* the imposition of a creed, and internal opponents cannot be blamed if Unitarian Christian theology fails to gain assent. The rejection of Unitarianism by other Christian denominations derives from the spread of non-Christianity among Unitarians. It also reflects

the sense among orthodox Christians that they do not need to engage with Unitarian ideas: that this is a closed chapter and all the debates have been had. Although such an intellectual reconstruction is by no means a sufficient condition of resuscitation, it is surely a necessary one. To this end, certain Cambridge Unitarians and sympathisers propose the organisation of a Unitarian theological colloquium. It should be confined to theists and Christians who are interested in seeing whether the Unitarian Christian tradition can be revived. Depending on the quality of the papers and presentations, a publication might ensue and the UCA has offered to finance this.

What could this sort of discussion hope to achieve? Well, suggestions can be signalled to provoke debate. Unitarians have hitherto tended to regard their speech as the antithesis of prejudice, in the strict sense of rejecting the pre-judgement of theological issues. The classical Unitarian refutes St Anselm, who declared in his *Proslogion* that ‘I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand’. As Joseph Priestley put it:

But should free inquiry lead to the destruction of Christianity itself, it ought not, on that account, to be discontinued; for we can only wish for the prevalence of Christianity on the supposition of its being true; and if it fall before the influence of free inquiry, it can only do so in consequence of its not being true.¹

The Priestleyan view sees Christianity as a kind of possible object, or system of claims about the world whose truth can be determined by a preceding phase of uncommitted debate. In practice there are two consequences: either the process of debate, or inquiry itself, imperialises the faith – the faith becomes actually equivalent to ‘free inquiry’, or else belief becomes as *post hoc* and definitive as the deduction of a problem. The impossibility of the latter (the implausibility of a common deduction of religion) underpins the creedless character of most Unitarianism. There have indeed been historical forms of rational credalism, such as the Racovian catechism, which have presented themselves as authoritative propositions conformable to reason. However, modern (let alone postmodern) scepticism renders this kind of assertion even less compelling than traditional dogmatism. What has actually happened is that common commitment has collapsed in the face of an ever-expanding critique, leaving Unitarian Christianity vulnerable to a motley host of ill-digested naturalistic doctrines. This is the intellectual structure of

¹ Joseph Priestley, ‘The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon’, in P. Miller (ed.), *Joseph Priestley: Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), xxiv

the crisis presently facing Unitarian theology.

Does this mean that there is no alternative to a return to Anselmian method? That a minimal, but definite set of Unitarian dogmas should be asserted as the groundwork of renewed religion? After all, traditional religion has persisted by insisting that reason is the handmaiden of faith, and that its proper role is to suggest the coherent implications of faith received. Perhaps a dogmatic Arianism or Socinianism could be founded *de novo*, but only at the cost of grievous damage to the way in which historical Unitarianism has actually developed: to the morals and values of biblical freedom that have constituted the Unitarian tradition. These are the distinctive and attractive gifts that Unitarianism can bring to our common culture. The truth of Unitarianism does not lie in a closed system of propositions – although renewed attention to the rich expansion of systematic commentary is vital. Instead, the contribution of Unitarianism as a historically extended way of thinking and acting manifests its truth. If we say, as we must, that human religious language is non-exhaustive and allusive, then the distinctive perspective offered by Unitarian Christianity takes its place in a plural world of religious reflection. It is sufficient for salvation but not exclusive. Thus there is no deduction that can show Trinitarian orthodoxy to be ‘wrong’ – God may be one and three at the same time, and also one, because we do not really understand what ‘one’ and ‘three’ mean in relation to the divine. There is no deduction that can disprove secular humanism (the placing of ultimate value in a matrix of evolved individuals) because there is no categorical understanding of the human person. What there can be is elaboration and reconstruction of the Unitarian canon, the commentary and reflective literary tradition concerning the divine unity, in order to propound a distinctive Unitarian *paedia*. In this sense, the challenge thrown down by the Koran is the correct one: ‘If you doubt what We have revealed to Our servant, produce one chapter comparable to it’ (2:23). The debate between religions is a comparison of literatures in the most expansive sense. It is analogous to the contrast of artistic traditions – not of course identical, as its primary criterion is the perception of holiness rather than aesthetic value. Hence the argument with Christian orthodoxy is about which tradition of commentary expounds most meaningfully the revelation of Jesus Christ. The argument with secular humanism is about which commentary reflects best upon the moral and spiritual nature of man. Let them produce one parable.

Canon and *paedia* should be fundamental subjects of Unitarian reconstruction (others of course may be found). The former is not just a reading list, and the latter not simply a list of instructions. Canonicity

requires recognition of genre and form as much as specific texts: canonical works are generative of works yet to come. Unitarian teaching and cultural formation should propose a distinctive conception of the liberal good life. What is it to be a free person, and to exercise virtue in light of the divine unity? What is liberal teaching? One would expect ideas like mutual education to figure largely, but the practical arrangement of this and more didactic conceptions depend upon a teaching ministry. A symposium should get to grips with what addressing such questions would really entail. Neither the sterile iteration of dogmatic statements, nor the fiction of a formless religion will suffice for Unitarian reconstruction. The re-articulation of a living community, and its tradition, might.

Joe Bord is a Research Fellow in History at Trinity College, Cambridge.

(Editorial note: Jo wrote this piece after a long series of conversations with me on the intellectual and spiritual state of the contemporary British Unitarian movement. The UCA will be supporting such a colloquium to be held at Trinity College, Cambridge during the spring of 2006.)



THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY:
WILL IT BE THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE?

Elek Rezi

I. Is there such a bright future?

At the end of the nineteenth-century the famous Transylvanian theologian and scientist Samuel Brassai, who has been called “the last Transylvanian polymath”, wrote a famous article in our periodical *The Christian Sower* entitled, *The Religion of the Future*. In this article he argued against the various anti-religious free thinkers of his time who, under the influence of philosophical positivism and rationalism, were attempting to create an artificial atheistic “religion” for the future, based only on philosophical speculations and rationalism. By stating very clearly that there is no future for such an artificial religion, which would eradicate the main features of religion: revelation, the supernatural aspect, and belief in a personal God, he concludes his article by saying that the religion of the future is not what the “false prophets of non-belief” are attempting to create because the religion of the future already exists, not as an artificial product but as a natural consequence of religious development namely, Unitarianism. He explains this by saying that Unitarianism deserves this role because it has both: [1] Christian roots and the transcendental dimension of a theistic religion, as opposed to atheism, and [2] the capacity to integrate the more rationalistic approach necessary to cater for the demands of the increasingly educated society of the future, in contrast to the dogmatic forms of Christianity.

Although he was arguing against atheistic rationalism, he admitted implicitly that in the religion of the future rationalism has to play a crucially important role

Looking back from our own time we can ask was Brassai's dream, that Unitarianism (and implicitly, liberal Christianity) would be the religion of the future, ever realistic?

The reality of our times awakened us from this dream and taught us that the dynamics of religious development are far from being linear, as modernist rationalism had envisioned it. A hundred years on, the reality of religious life today—when fundamentalism is growing and liberal Christianity is decreasing both in numbers and in social influence seems to prove exactly the opposite, liberal Christianity is the religion of the past!

Still there is good news. Only those particular historical manifestations and forms of liberal Christianity that are no longer relevant will die; but its enduring spirit has the capacity to receive new birth by virtue of its in-built potential for self-questioning, self-correction, and adaptation to changing times and to new manifestations of the unchangeable. The moment the present manifestation is regarded as final, liberalism lapses into orthodoxy.

The real challenge is to identify those historical manifestations that are no longer relevant, because if liberal Christianity is to have a future then the ability to adapt to the needs of changing times cannot go beyond certain limits. We need to rephrase our values and find new ways of implementing them; we can even attempt new depths and new heights in identifying our spiritual values, but to give up anything of its core values for the sake of adaptation would be the end of liberal Christianity.

In the nineteenth-century, when industrialization and the development of the sciences had such a tremendous impact on the development of a new rationalism, it was natural that liberal Christians should become convinced that it was only a matter of time before liberal Christianity would conquer the world. Scientific biblical-theological research was offering new evidence that, even from the point of view of the Bible, liberal Christianity was the only credible alternative. We can say that the whole nineteenth-century was characterized by a high degree of self-confidence and optimism regarding the values and possibilities of humankind. It seemed that the continuous development of science and society would reveal the ultimate mysteries of the world and would solve, step by step, the major existing problems which are the sources of human suffering.

The twentieth-century, at its very beginning, proved the opposite. The drive of optimistic self-confidence was broken. The First World War proved

that scientific and technological development meant, primarily, more destructive weapons for more systematic human aggression and the highest number of casualties and the greatest loss of human life in history. In these circumstances, when over-simplified, optimistic self-confidence came to a sudden stop, it became obvious that human existence is more complex and unpredictable than had been thought earlier. In Christianity, this realization was manifested in the rejection of the rationalism of liberalism in favour of dogmatism.

The drive of optimism was broken even further by all the other terrible events and sufferings of the century: the Communist gulags, the gas chambers of the Second World War, the ethnic cleansings in the recent Balkan wars and the several other wars all over the world. The expectations for humankind, of whom constant improvement through knowledge and education were once predicted, had failed. Recent events had proved that human aggression and bestiality, in spite of the information revolution and scientific, technological and industrial development, were even more characteristic than had earlier been thought. These changes did not fulfil their promise or solve the major problems of human existence indeed the opposite has proved to be the case. Because of greed and aggression they are endangering the very existence of life over the whole planet and, instead of being the source of hope for our future, they are threatening it.

It is no surprise that, in this changed world which seems to prove the irrational, irrationality is gaining ground. It is fertile soil for superstition, the occult and fundamentalist religion. But we would make a terrible mistake if we do not realize that there is still a need for a healthy and more spiritual and transcendental religious aspiration that is relevant to this changed human condition.

II. Understanding our strengths and weaknesses historically

If liberal Christianity is really to be an important religion in the future, this will not happen simply because of an automatic inertia of developmental trends—as was thought earlier—but by being able to live up to its real possibilities and mission in an ever-changing world. There is a need for it to live up to its historic value of free questioning by, first of all, self-questioning; by identifying its own past mistakes, so they can be avoided, and those values that are worth being preserved.

The historical roots of liberal Christianity can be summed up in the words of Paul: “from the bondage of corruption to the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21); and became embodied in the Radical Reformation as a protest against the authoritarian organization and

unquestionable dogmatism of the Church. This movement was based on those basic historical values which have, from its beginnings, been the core values of liberal Christianity: inner authority; the authority of conscience and reason; individual freedom of conscience; the right to question those religious truths deemed final; critical freedom, including self-criticism and criticism of sacred literature; freedom to preserve and modify meaningful forms, and so on. We can see that in the centre of these values stands freedom—in opposition to so many forms of bondage from which the human spirit wanted to break free. The aspiration and struggle for the various manifestations of religious, spiritual and social freedom has remained the characteristic feature of liberal Christianity up to our own time.

Through this, liberal Christianity has been a highly influential and transforming force for change, implementing its values within society and so shaping the development of Europe: democracy, the worth and dignity of the individual, entrepreneurial freedom and so on.

On the other hand, liberal Christianity was itself exposed to other influences on society, especially the influence of science and philosophy. Although these were often beneficial for its further development, they also created limitations and led to weaknesses, such as empiricism, rationalism, and so on. The supposedly Darwinian view of human evolution, progressing ‘onward and upward forever’, was alleged to be implicit in the New Testament. According to the scientific trends, liberal Christianity reinterpreted the Bible from its own point of view. It tried to find biblical foundation for the contemporary scientific approach, so taking the path of the so-called ‘modernization of the gospel’. As Father Tyrell noted, the liberal Christian looks down the deep well of higher criticism, sees his own image and calls it Jesus. As James Luther Adams says in characterizing this era, this phenomenon led to many weaknesses which we need to face if we are to understand our tradition:

a. The loss of depth and spiritual feature in the concept of God, man and history. The concept of God became purely immanent losing its transcendental dimension; humans were believed gradually to be becoming better and better; history has viewed as the arena of unilinear progress. In the nineteenth-century under the influence of utilitarianism and Kantianism, liberal Christianity tended to identify religion with the good life, turning it into moralism and again losing the vertical dimension. The protest against the Christ of the creeds, emphasizing the ethical aspect of the teachings of Jesus, led to loss of the transcendental and mystical dimensions of the religion of Jesus.

b. The loss of wholeness: The modern way of looking at nature and the environment from the point of view of the human struggle for freedom often presented the forces and phenomena of nature as enemies to be conquered. The approach of free entrepreneurship viewed the resources of nature mainly as sources to be exploited. So nature lost its sacredness and thus was lost also the concept of the wholeness of the universe. The emphasis was put on activist attitudes for the sake of “more” and “better” in various fragmented fields, losing sight of both the consequences and the responsibilities of this activism for the Whole.

c. The loss of historical roots: Being focused on the present and an optimistic view of the future, liberal Christianity often developed an uncritical anti-traditionalism, throwing away in revolutionary mood the values of the past. The past was valued to the degree that it could be used to ‘prove’ contemporary concepts.

d. Individualism: The original legitimate struggle for freedom of the individual led slowly to an excess of individualism. This led to the value of solidarity within society being lost from sight, along with love and charitable responsibility towards those in need. This is the loss of wholeness at the level of society. The enumerated weaknesses are rooted in the ephemeral historical manifestation of our values or deviations from them because of various influences. We should use our self-critical approach to return to the enduring core of our liberal Christian spirit, in ways that are in accord with the needs our times.

III. The need to shift the paradigms

In an age when scientific development changed the understanding of all existing things and it became obvious that there is an organic universe of fundamentally interdependent forces and processes based on quantum mechanics and relativity, and where the human condition is in major change, there is an urgent need for liberal Christianity to redefine its position and rediscover the relevance of its mission in this new context. It is a major problem and an anachronism to live in a post-modern era according to the patterns and reflexes of the modern age which has slowly passed away. There is an expectation and a need for liberal Christianity to shift its paradigms:

§1. Liberal Christianity needs to realize that, in this age, the values so highly celebrated in the modern age are not relevant anymore or are even counterproductive. Those that are still relevant must be translated into the language of our times.

§2. Liberal Christianity needs to redefine its spiritual—transcendental dimension over against the still present burden of rationalism, and to find in

worship and liturgy ways to address the complexity of the human soul and so mediate this dimension in a proper form to people seeking spiritual and religious nourishment.

§3. Besides the rationalistic and critical approach towards the Bible which was so important up to now, it is time to let those texts so touch us and be reborn within us that they become, not only the foundation of our arguments, but a passionate, living inspiration through our communion with the past.

§4. Instead of individualism there is a need to rediscover the main mission of the Gospel: actively to live the solidarity that is based on love towards our fellow human beings. To dare to accept the weaknesses, miseries, sufferings and limitations of humankind, but also to see the potential of people who are in need of love and caring affection, and who we once preferred to see only in an artificial way—always sane and healthy, striving towards perfection.

§5. There is a need to regain the ability to restore the wholeness that is always being broken.

§6. Liberal Christianity needs to go beyond the comfortable, individualistic, “I found it for myself” approach, which avoids even the word mission, and has to take responsibility to “spread the word” and offer the values of liberal Christianity to the world. This is especially true of introducing the younger generation, in a responsible way, to our religion and to make sure that they will continue to be inspired by our values.

§7. There is a need to preserve our Christian roots and our identity. Liberal Christianity will certainly not be the religion of the future if at a certain stage liberal Christians themselves think it liberal to abandon their Christian roots for the sake of being more universal: embracing everything while losing the roots and the ground under their feet. Authentic universalism is always rooted in particularity, having the capacity to be open to the values of other world religions.

§8. There is a historical responsibility towards the teachings of Jesus, because only liberal Christianity can prove that the original religion of Jesus is, in its essence, the most liberal of religions.

§9. Liberal Christianity not being in captivity to any unquestionable dogma, it has the potential, and thus the responsibility, to promote dialogue among the different religious systems. We saw that the most praised virtue of the late pope was his apparent openness towards the other world religions. The world is tired of wars and conflicts and awaits this openness of cultures and religions. This is a matter of life and death, if we think of the

threat of religious terrorism and other sufferings caused by the clash of different religions.

§10. In an age when the major issue is no longer the struggle for the freedom of the individual against oppressive authoritarian institutions and dogmas - as it was at the beginnings of liberal Christianity - but rather the struggle against destructive individualism and alienation, and when the main concern is not the survival of humankind against the forces of the nature but the survival of nature against the greed and destruction of the humankind, the main value of liberal Christianity needs to shift from liberty alone to liberty combined with responsibility, with the emphasis on responsibility.

§11. In our age when individualism and libertinism fuelled by egoism are threatening the very existence of the world, liberal Christianity must stand firmly for certain values and be a strong voice against such negative aspects as economic liberalism.

§12. When the major threat is the loss of all kinds of irreplaceable things, from spiritual values to animal species and landscapes, this responsibility needs to lead to an attitude of preservation. The new approach towards the whole of existence must shift from freedom of the individual to responsibility, to stewardship of the whole and of all existing life. It must be a shift from individualism to a more communitarian approach, with encouragement to active engagement in society.

§13. In the relativity of values of our times, liberal Christianity needs to offer the framework of everlasting, unchangeable values which can inspire and uplift the spirit.

IV. The religion of the future?

We need to go beyond the simplistic approaches of both the overly-optimistic and the pessimistic, and answer the question in a more realistic and sophisticated way. Liberal Christianity, having the ability to self-correct can, from time to time, after ups and downs, be reborn Phoenix-like from its own ashes. If it is to burn brightly from time to time, what needs to be burned are the things in whose ashes are found real hopes for the future. It won't be the sole religion of the future, but it will be a humble, meaningful religion of the future offering not the, but one authentic answer for the further quest for the ultimate meaning of the human condition in relation to the Whole.

Elek Rezi is a Unitarian minister presently teaching at the Theological Institute in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, Romania.

A UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN MINISTERS' RETREAT

In July six Unitarian Christian ministers went on a short retreat on the Isle of Sheppey. Time was spent exploring different aspects of our tradition as well as allowing us the opportunity to express our individual hopes and concerns. We spent some time in Bible study, and Andrew Parker led us in a poignant exploration of the incidents involving the “beloved disciple” found in the Gospel According to St John. Naturally we spent much time together in worship (both in the morning and evening and in a communion service before our final meal) and we also simply enjoyed each other’s company over shared meals and during some delightful walks by the sea. The retreat was organized by the new chairman of the UCA, Chris Wilson.



Left to right: Alex Bradley (Knutsford), Jeff Gould (Dean Row, Hale & Styal), Jean McNeile (Padiham), Andrew Parker (Stalybridge & Stockport), Chris Wilson (Norwich & Great Yarmouth) and Andrew Brown (Cambridge).



AS GOOD AS NEW – A RADICAL RETELLING OF THE SCRIPTURES by John Henson
(New York & Alresford, O Books 2005)

Review by Chris Wilson

The *Good As New* translation of the Christian scriptures has to be a ‘must have’ for all religious liberals. Written in contemporary language it brings to life the deeper message of the Christian gospel. It is lively, provocative and at times profound.

No doubt, it won’t be to everyone’s taste. The names of all the main characters are given modern equivalents; Peter as Rocky, Lazarus as Larry does take some getting used to, and yet it does bring the dialogues to life. Having said that, the author resists the temptation to change Jesus to Joshua, which surely would have been in keeping with the modernist thrust used

elsewhere.

Still, the translation is accessible, usable, and an ideal resource for those Unitarian and Free Christians who are looking for a fresh way to bring the scriptures to life. This, I think *Good As New* can do – perhaps more so than say, the *Good News Bible*. It also offers a language style that echoes that of the original writers of scripture – after all, were they not written in ‘common’ Greek?

This being the case, *Good As New*, perhaps take us back to where we once were – scriptures written in ordinary everyday language for ordinary, everyday people. Now that would be radical!



UCA BADGES COMING SOON . . .

At the last UCA Council meeting it was decided to proceed with the production of a UCA lapel badge (7/8” diameter). They will be available for sale very shortly and our thanks go to Ken Howard for organizing this. It is hoped that having a shared symbol for our Unitarian Christian community will help in a small way to develop amongst us a sense of confidence and collegiality.



PROPOSED UCA SERVICES AND EVENTS 2006

We hope to have a number of services and events in 2006, some organized by the UCA Council and some where UCA members and friends are invited to join a congregation for an occasion, particularly special services or events marking important dates in the Christian calendar. If you would like to invite UCA members to such an occasion at your church please send details to, or telephone, The Revd Andrew Parker (details on back page of *The Herald*). Also, if your church holds regular or occasional services of Holy Communion we would like to know the time and frequency so that at some future date we can include a list in the Herald.

DATES FOR 2006

Please make a note of these dates, more information will be provided nearer the time.

Sat. 15th April Easter Vigil: The Memorial Church, Cambridge, 6.30pm

Sat. 15th April Easter Vigil: Stalybridge Unitarian Church, 8 pm

Both of these services in the liberal Christian tradition will be based on the service in use at King’s Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts and will include a service of Holy Communion.

Whit Sunday 4th June: Whitsuntide Procession of Witness. Stalybridge Unitarian Church 2pm. Brass bands, banners and an opportunity to add our Unitarian Christian witness to the united service and procession with other churches in the town.

Dates to be arranged:

Annual General Meeting to be held during the GA meetings at Chester.
Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture Conference day for UCA Corporate Member Congregations.



THE SON OF GOD PASSED BY TODAY by Cliff Reed

Montserrat, Catalunya, 7th November 2005.

The Son of God
passed by today
on his way to the pub,
but no one noticed.

They were all
on their way
to church –
for once.

In one church
they ate the
Son of God –
or thought they did.

In another church
they shouted his name a lot
but seemed more interested
in turning themselves on.

In another church
they doubted whether there was a Son of God,
or whether there was a God either,
for that matter.

But the Son of God
just let them
get on with it,
as he always has.

And down the pub
he talked with
a broken friend
and brought him back to life.

Cliff Reed is the minister at the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House.



BREAD AND WINE ARE OF THE EARTH by Peter Sampson

Bread and wine are of the earth
God's good food by us refined.
What relish do we taste
When we savour God's good food!
Jesus said: "Remember me
When at board you sit and eat
With friends and family
Gathered in communion close.'
Sacred is our flesh and blood
We are all composed of God.

Peter Sampson is an active British Unitarian who for many years sat on the Worship Panel of the General Assembly.

(Editorial note: The metre of Peter's lyric is 7.7. and he informs me that no tune has been written for it yet. If anyone is inspired to write one then please let us know!)



A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS DAY by Andrew Brown

God of new beginnings, let this day be for us one of thanks and wonder.
May the birth of Jesus find its echo in all our words and deeds. Imbue
us with the wisdom of the mystic who knew that Christ could be born a
thousand times in Bethlehem but that if he were not born in each of us, all
would be in vain. So help us make this, and all our homes, the cribside and
to become loving parents of Your divine presence in our world. Amen.



NOW WHERE HAVE I HEARD THIS BEFORE? A GLANCE ACROSS THE POND
Andrew Brown

On September 28, 2000 a new Unitarian Association was started in the
USA called the *American Unitarian Conference*. Not surprisingly this has

caused some controversy within the *Unitarian Universalist Association*. There were those who, inevitably, saw the AUC as being simply “splitters.” Whether or not they were, or are, is certainly not for me to say here but what I can say is that some of the issues that led to the formation of the AUC are beginning to resonate very strongly amongst us here in the UK. The following quotation is from a piece written by Dean Fisher (*The American Unitarian Conference* in Volume VII, Number 2 of the *Unitarian Universalist Voice, An Independent Journal of News & Opinion*, Fall 2001) and it reveals this clearly:

As anyone who has honestly surveyed the UU landscape in this country well knows, Unitarian Universalism is a quite a hodge podge. It has been said that it is a “federation of religions.” It is certainly pluralistic, often times within a congregation, and certainly from congregation to congregation. In many congregations, atheists have become dominant and the UUA takes great care not to offend their “humanist” faction. Many congregations are so focused on being open to all points of view that they drain every drop of religion from their congregational life in order to not offend anyone, ultimately not serving the religious needs of any of their congregants. The one thing you can say for sure is that you won’t know for sure what you’ll get when you first set foot in a UU congregation. You might get Unitarian Christianity, you might get Paganism, you might get a political lecture, and you might get an intellectual discussion on the writings of some great philosopher. But is this Unitarianism? Is this what William Ellery Channing had in mind? I don’t think so. Yes, Unitarianism respected the other religions and was open to insights from many sources, but respecting them doesn’t mean we are to embrace them as ours. Unitarianism was not founded to be all things to all people, it was founded as a rejection of the Trinity and Calvinism. It was founded to be tolerant of other faith traditions and to learn from them, not to be replaced by them.

And Unitarianism certainly was not founded as a rejection of God or Christianity. Sadly, all too many UU churches have become anti-Christian and anti-God in their practice, whether they do so overtly or culturally. This void is often filled with “Politics as Religion”, substituting salvation by Grace with salvation by legislation.

Now what are we to make of this here in the UK? Only time will tell, only time will tell.

If you are interested in exploring the AUC’s informative website (which includes some real treasures of Unitarian Christianity) it can be found at the following address: <http://www.americanunitarian.org/>

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

Registered Charity No 101 777 1

Aim: 'To preserve and strengthen the Christian tradition within the Unitarian Movement'

Members receive copies of the Unitarian Christian Herald, notice of events, etc
Annual subscription rates are:

Individuals £7: Families £10: Students & Unwaged £4
(subscription to Herald only £5)

Overseas subscribers: please add an extra amount to cover postage.
Congregational membership £35.00 includes 5 copies of the Herald

Please complete this form and send it with your cheque or postal order to the
Treasurer, Mr Don Booth, 43 Mewburn Rd, Banbury, Oxon, OX16 9PQ

I/We are in sympathy with the Aim as printed above and wish to join the U.C.A.

Name (s) (BLOCK letters please)
.

Address
.

Postcode

Telephone

Email

I/we enclose a cheque/Postal order for*Individual/* Family/*student/* unwaged
Congregational (*Please delete as applicable) Made payable to the Unitarian
Christian Association.

I/we do not wish to join the U.C.A. but would like to
subscribe to the Herald @ £5 per year

If you wish to receive a receipt please complete the section below

Received the sum of £_____ from _____

As payment of membership subscription to the U.C.A. / Herald

D Booth U.C.A.Treasurer

**Please address all other membership enquires to the
Revd Andrew Parker (see back of *The Herald* for details)**

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION



OFFICERS

The Revd Dr Arthur Long (President)

65 Scholes Lane, Prestwich, Manchester M25 0AW

Telephone: 0161 798 0779

Email: Arthur.long@care4free.net

The Revd Chris Wilson MA (Chairman)

1 Fairview Grove, Swaffham Prior, Cambridgeshire CB5 0LB

Telephone: 01638 742091

Email: Cjwilson63@aol.com

Mr Kenneth Howard (Hon. Secretary)

75 Hutton Avenue, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire OL6 6QZ

Telephone: 0161 330 1295

Email: ken75howard1@aol.com

Mr Donald Booth (Treasurer)

43 Mewburn Road, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9PQ

Telephone: 01295 253921

Email: don@mewburn43.freeserve.co.uk

The Revd Andrew Parker B.Th. (Membership Secretary)

260 Wood Street, Langley, Middleton, Manchester M24 5GL

Telephone: 0161 643 1824

Email: arp9898@hotmail.com

The Revd Andrew James Brown MA (Herald Editor)

The Manse, 5 Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW

Telephone: 01223 576952

Email: mail@revajbrown.demon.co.uk