

# THE HERALD

THE JOURNAL OF THE UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION—No. 67

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At Styal (*left to right*): outgoing Moderator, Revd Chris Wilson;  
Hon. President, Revd Brian Cockroft; Moderator, Revd Alex Bradley.

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### LEADING ARTICLE: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SPINOZA

It has long seemed to me that one of the most pressing questions that faces the *Unitarian Christian Association* (UCA) is whether we can *really* revision and rearticulate a coherent faith that is *continuous* with our heritage but not *identical* with it. It also seems clear that we will have failed if we are ever seduced into



merely attempting to recreate a version of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century unitarian Christianity. We really do have to be more imaginative and radical than that – complex and sometimes uncomfortable though this process may well be. It is not, of course, for me to tell anyone what our *collective* solution to this question might be – or even whether it is a question that should be addressed (these are simply my own personal musings on the subject and not those of the UCA) – but I can, at least, keep the subject on the table.

One of the continuous strands that can be clearly seen in our procession of faith is one which leads from the Polish Socinians at the end of the seventeenth-century into Holland and particularly into the small group of radical Christians called the *Collegiants*.<sup>1</sup> Within their

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<sup>1</sup> C.f. Fix, Andrew C., *Prophecy and Reason – The Dutch Collegiants in the Early*

fold, in addition to many Remonstrants and Mennonites, were to be found a number Socinians. For a short period of time within that remarkable group could also be found the philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), One of his Socinian Collegiant friends was Peter Balling who tried to articulate a Spinozistic Socinianism. He did this most notably (and I think beautifully) in a tract of 1662 called *Het Licht op den Kandelaar* (The Light on the Candlestick).<sup>1</sup> Andrew Fix has explored this interesting connection in his book *Prophecy and Reason – The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* as has Jonathan Israels in his magisterial two volume study of the Radical Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

The combination of Socinianism and Spinoza’s thought had a powerful influence in England (especially upon the Deists) but it was a religious strand that has often been kept right out of public view. The chief reason for this was because Spinoza’s thought was clearly not Theism in any traditional sense, after all for Spinoza God *was* Nature, and Nature *was* God; in Spinoza’s own terminology, *Deus sive Natura* (where the *sive* denotes equivalence). Inevitably, many people believed him to be no more than a pantheist or, worse still, an atheist. Whilst it is true that for Spinoza God was in no way personal, nor acted in a providential manner, God (or Nature) was still, for him a divine reality – a Divine Unity. In fact *Deus sive Natura was* reality itself.

*“Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can  
be, nor be conceived without God.”*

As he memorably wrote: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be, nor be conceived without God” (*The Ethics*, Chapter 1 Prop. 15).

But for all its hidden-ness over the past three centuries Spinoza’s thought has never quite gone from Unitarian circles – indeed in Timothy Sprigge (a member of our church in Edinburgh and who died only last year) we had a world-class philosopher who was once

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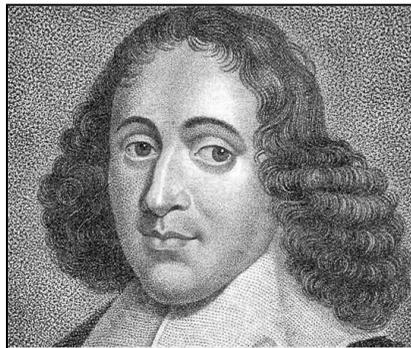
*Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press, 1991)

<sup>1</sup> An online copy of this can be found at:

<http://www.universalistfriends.org/candle.html>

<sup>2</sup> Israel, Jonathan I., *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press 2001) and *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford University Press 2006, esp. pp. 115–134)

described as “Spinoza reincarnated.”<sup>1</sup> I cannot expand upon it fully in this brief piece but I think that Unitarians should take another long look at Spinoza. Primarily this is because his thinking so strongly resonates, not only with the current state of human knowledge and its many concerns (ecological, political scientific and religious), but also with our particular Unitarian concerns (namely the Oneness of God and our distinctive valuing of the man Jesus). Not to do this would be, in my opinion, foolhardy. The answer to our present catastrophic intellectual, theological and numerical decline may be staring us in the face in Spinoza’s radical thinking about religion, democracy and reason. True, it would mean considering openly and courageously dispensing with belief in a personalistic, providential conception of God as well as requiring from us an absolutely open acknowledgement that we are using our religious language of our tradition *only* in a *metaphorical* fashion, but the gains (in truth/knowledge and in a deep and very real and distinct Unitarian spirituality) seem to me to outweigh by far any losses we may experience along the way.



As the briefest taster of what I mean I include in this edition a short piece by the philosopher Victor Nuovo entitled *Why I am not a militant atheist*. This was published in a Vermont paper and has received widespread public support from many liberal Christians across the state. I recommend it and, of course, Spinoza to you for further thought.

Andrew Brown is the minister of the *Memorial Church* in Cambridge and a Chaplain to the *University of Cambridge*, *Anglia Ruskin University* and *Cambridge Regional College*. He also teaches at the *Woolf Institute* in Cambridge and is secretary of the *East of England Faiths Council*. His blog can be found at:  
<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Sprigge was Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at Edinburgh University (1979-89).

## OUTGOING MODERATOR'S REPORT 2006–2008

Dear Friends, at the last UCA Synod at Norcliffe Chapel, Styal (brief report by Ken Howard and pictures by Ian Bradbury here and on p. 6) my term of Office came to an end. It has been a real privilege to serve the *Unitarian Christian Association* (UCA), its Synod and Officer Group as your Moderator. I thank you all for this, and I wish my successor, the Revd Alex Bradley, every success as he takes over for the 2008–2010.



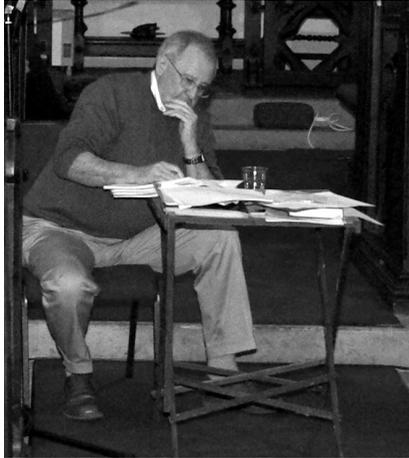
Left to right: The Revds Chris Wilson and Alex Bradley at Styal. © Ian Bradbury

We have, together, achieved a great deal: A new Constitution – which reflects our determination to ‘be Church’; clearly established a recognisable ecclesiastical structure; relaunched a highly-respected and scholarly journal; a tie, badge, and new logo; an updated website; a new Prayer Book; a new pamphlet; we are attracting new members, both congregations (c. 50 congregations now in membership) and individuals; offered modest financial support for all of our ministerial students, including those who serve the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (NSPCI); maintained, despite some tension, our link with the national General Assembly (GA); continued to reaffirm our support for the GA’s Object; supported a visit to the NSPCI Synod in Belfast; and, most importantly, the reestablishment of a link

through us, between the NSPCI and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

So, we have had a good year. But there is much still to do. I hope that the UCA resists its detractors from 'right' and 'left'. That we resist still, those who say that you cannot be a Christian and Unitarian and those who say, you cannot be Unitarian and a Christian. We should say still, that we remain both. But that, more than that, we can say that within our ranks all shades of Christian thought and belief are welcome and, taking our cue

from the NSPCI, that the words and teachings of Jesus must still take precedence over the words, and creeds of later and lesser men. We must also continue to develop the link with the NSPCI and maintain that with the General Assembly. I also wish to record my sincere thanks to the Officer Group, and to Synod for their support; and in particular to our always hard-working



Clerk of Synod, Ken Howard (*pictured above* taking the minutes at this year's AGM). So much of our work and witness would not have been possible without Ken's work. Thank you, too, to the congregation at Styal for hosting us. Thank you, to all of you.

Friends, I am confident, that the UCA will grow further, in membership, work and witness, being that place within our wider and liberal family of faith, where a gentle, liberal, and inclusive: 'Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form' can be encountered. For if not here, then where? And if not now, then when?

May God, bless the UCA and its endeavours over the next two years.

The Revd Chris Wilson is the outgoing Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, the Associate Minister of the Eastern Union of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches, co-ordinator of *Cambridge Regional College's* multi-faith chaplaincy and he sits on the *National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education* (FBFE).

## THE UCA'S 6TH SYNOD AND AGM AT STYAL

UCA Clerk, **Ken Howard**, gives a brief report on the recent Synod.

The 6th Synod of The Unitarian Christian Association took place at Norcliffe Chapel Styal on Saturday 1st March 2008. In line with the constitution the Revd Chris Wilson stood down as Moderator after a period of office which saw the resurgence of the Association.



The Synod Service at Norcliffe Chapel, Styal. © Ian Bradbury

The Revd Alex Bradley was unanimously elected as Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association. Alex is currently Minister at Knutsford and Styal having previously been Minister at Enfield and Barnet, Bethnal Green and Newington Green.

The Association is looking to *consolidate its* place in the Unitarian Free Christian movement and is looking forward to more growth during Alex's term of office.

The new Officer group is as follows:

|                             |                             |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| The Revd Brian Cockroft     | <i>Honorary President</i>   |
| The Revd Alex Bradley       | <i>Moderator</i>            |
| Ken Howard                  | <i>Clerk</i>                |
| The Revd Andrew Parker      | <i>Membership Secretary</i> |
| Sandra Wilson               | <i>Treasurer</i>            |
| The Revd Chris Wilson       | <i>Chaplain</i>             |
| The Revd Jeffrey Lane Gould | <i>Events Officer</i>       |

The Revd Jean McNeile  
Catherine Fozard

*Retreats Officer*  
*Membership Development and*  
*Publicity Officer*  
*NSPCI Representative*

The Revd Colin Campbell



Norcliffe Chapel, Styal. © Ian Bradbury



Tea after the AGM © Ian Bradbury

## WHY I AM NOT A MILITANT ATHEIST

**Victor Nuovo** finds in the deep religious insights of Spinoza an answer to the dangers of contemporary militant atheism.

**R**ichard Dawkins and other authors of recent books professing atheism have been criticized in the media not only for their atheism but also for their alleged militancy in expressing it. This criticism has provoked the following reflection.

If to deny that there exists an eternal and infinite person, who absolutely transcends nature, who is almighty, the creator of the world, who governs all things providentially, whose will determines right and wrong, and who rightfully claims dominion over all his creatures and obedience from them along with gratitude, who from the beginning of creation has revealed his purposes and demands, openly and directly or in veiled statements, who has entered at various times into covenants or contracts with individuals or communities, whose revelations, now recorded in sacred books, must be accepted as true however imperfectly they may be understood – if to deny all of these things makes one an atheist, then I must be counted one, for I'm sure that they are false and I certainly deny them.

However, it is not obvious that to deny of these things makes one an atheist. The great philosopher Spinoza (1632-76) denied them and yet claimed to be a theist. He equated God with nature (which is the only thing we can honestly claim to know about), although not with natural things, but with productive power. Galaxies, solar systems, the sun and moon, you and I, everything that has come to be since the big bang, are nature's products; they are finite and not divine.

Nature is not a person who hears and answers prayers, tries the righteous and hates the wicked, intervenes miraculously in the course of things and predetermines the outcome of history; rather nature is impersonal inexhaustibly productive; it is being itself generating itself in an infinite variety of ways. The natural world is everywhere an expression of intelligence, which is a divine attribute, and rational beings, like you and I, when nature's gift of curiosity awakens in us, discover in nature manifold wonders that cause us to regard it as something properly to be called divine.

I have another reason for disclaiming the label of atheist. I belong to a religious community. I believe that religious communities

properly conceived play an important role in human society. The particular religious community to which I belong professes that its only orthodoxy is a love of truth.

*"The particular religious community to which I belong professes that its only orthodoxy is a love of truth."*

It is open and affirming, welcoming everyone unconditionally; it has renounced exclusivity, and regards everyone, whether within or without the boundaries of its community, as an equal, to be valued and respected for their humanity, worthy of respect and caring attention. This is an idea of religious community that transcends religion. Without communities like this, it is unlikely that a civil society such as ours would endure. So I gladly belong to it.

The justification of this idea of community may also be found in the writings of Spinoza. He writes that at the root of every living creature's being there operates a principle of self-love, an impulse to preserve oneself in being. This may seem a selfish principle, and it is so long as we haven't begun to reflect about it, so long as it remains a mere impulse or instinct. But when we reflect upon it and discover that it is an essential characteristic of all life, this principle transforms itself into a rational desire for community. We cherish and enjoy this life for others as well as ourselves; we care for each other as parts of infinite nature; we become persons and lovers of nature; and we endeavour not only to preserve each other in being but also to promote a shared happiness through acts of kindness, through friendliness, and also through laws [call them laws of nature] and institutions that foster and promote life.

As to militancy, it is bad; the horrors and violence of this century and the last abundantly prove that when militancy is joined to a religion or a secular ideology it is absolutely bad, beyond redemption.

Victor Nuovo is Professor of Philosophy and Dean of Arts and Humanities at Middlebury College, Vermont USA and a Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, Oxford. Two of Victor's sermons have appeared in earlier editions of the Herald. He is theologian in residence at member of the *Congregational Church* of Middlebury, Vermont.

## REDISCOVERING THE SACRED

In a recent sermon, **Jim Corrigan** traces the history of the Hindu reform group, the *Brahmo Samaj*, and finds that contemporary Unitarians have much to learn from it.

It's often said by historians that "there are no 'ifs' in history". To ask the question: "what if Hitler had died in 1933?" (the year he came to power), is to go down a route of endless – and ultimately pointless – speculation. To take an example closer to home: "what if Hampstead Unitarians had not split in 1903?" (a split which produced our own Golders Green congregation) – the speculation could go on here too – "would any of us have ever met?"...well, we certainly wouldn't be sitting here today, but who knows? So while the past can be re-interpreted and re-discovered, it can never be changed.

On the other hand, if we look at the present and future, our possibilities seem infinite. I could raise my arm, or lower it, and so could we all. Each moment appears to offer limitless choices. So one can safely say that there is nothing inevitable about outcomes – until they happen! The future is not pre-determined, although one result may be more likely to occur than another. All kinds of factors, from chance to human will, both individual and collective, make history. Great men and women can change the world.

Well, what has this got to do with the *Brahmo Samaj*? This religious movement was formed one-hundred and eighty years ago in Calcutta (*Kolkata*) during a drive to reform Hinduism and Indian society – and it continues to this day. It's had in its ranks some of India's most renowned citizens, including the Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore. The *Brahmo Samaj* (which means the Society for the Worshippers of One God) has always been close to our own Unitarian faith.

But without one man, any drive to reform Hinduism two hundred years ago was most unlikely to have produced the religious outcome it did – the formation of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Who was this man? He was Ram Mohan Roy, regarded as the Founder of Modern India.

Roy was one of the great men of history, a central figure in the Bengali Renaissance of the early nineteenth-century, a man of deep learning, and a great religious and political reformer. I will be arguing that he not only influenced Indian society and nineteenth-century

Unitarianism, but that his thinking still has relevance for Unitarians today.

In order to understand the challenge facing Ram Mohan Roy, we need to appreciate the society he grew up in, the India of more than 200 years ago. *A Brahma Samaj* historian, Brajendranath Seal, wrote of this period that it was ‘perhaps the darkest in modern Indian history’. The vital institutions of the old society ‘had all crumbled’ – while law and administration were ‘in a chaotic state’. Reconstitution and renovation were needed, this historian writes, but based on what principle? “There were



three bodies of culture, three civilisations in conflict – the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian or Occidental. And the question was: how to find a point of unity among these warring forces? The origins of modern India lay there.”

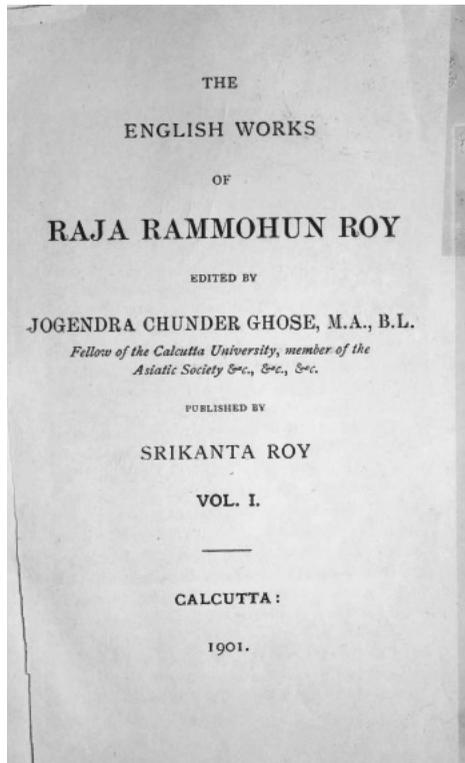
So *how* was Roy moulded by the India of this time? Ram Mohan Roy was born in 1772 in the province of Bengal to an orthodox Hindu family of the Brahmin class – the caste of priests and scholars. After home study, where he was introduced to Sanskrit, the language of the Brahminical scriptures, he was sent to Patna to learn Persian and Arabic. Here he studied the *Qu’ran*, and it is said his eyes were opened for the first time to the errors of Hindu ‘idoltry’, the worship of many gods. He was deeply attracted to Sufism, a mystical form of Islam.

On his return home, he fell out with his father over the idolatry he saw in contemporary Hinduism, and he travelled on foot to Tibet where he remained for more than three years studying Buddhism. As so often with Roy, he eventually clashed with his hosts over idolatry – this time over worship of lamas, the gurus – he just escaped with his life.

Back in India, he began an intensive study of English. His first known work was published: *A Gift to Monotheists*, which protested against idol worship and creeds while laying a foundation for a universal religion within the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead. Roy served as a senior administrator in the East India Company, and he set up study groups with Hindus, Jains and Muslims. The patterns of his early years continued through the rest of life, as he attempted to revive Indian society. While trying to forge a universal religion, he came into conflict with traditional views, particularly in Hinduism and Christianity. He argued for a return to the Monotheism of the ancient Hindu scriptures, the Vedas and the Upanishads. His attacks on what he saw as the corruption of contemporary Hinduism provoked a bitter reaction, including family feuds, with his own mother pursuing attempts to strip him of his inheritance.

Roy translated the Sanskrit classics into Bengali for the first time. And it is often forgotten that it was Roy's (very Unitarian) translations of key texts of the Upanishads into English that fired the imagination of the American transcendentalists, particularly Emerson and Thoreau. They were captivated by the 'nature mysticism' of the Hindu scriptures, the emphasis on the oneness of the Divine, its direct links to the human soul, to nature and the cosmos – the Divine was everywhere. The New England transcendentalists changed American Unitarianism and deeply influenced fellow writers.

Roy was a great social reformer, campaigning throughout his life



against injustice, particularly for the rights of women. He is famed for playing the leading role in the abolition of *suttee*, the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. He also campaigned for married women to be able to remarry, and against polygamy and the caste society. He believed strongly in English education, the teaching of science and mathematics, and he helped secure its establishment in India, including for girls.

He came into contact with Christianity, and studied the Bible, translating the Gospels into Bengali. He was greatly impressed by the moral teachings of Jesus, but he could not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. He was soon under strident attack from Christian missionaries. However, he won a convert to his Unitarian views, a Baptist missionary named William Adam. Roy helped Adam set up a Unitarian Mission in Calcutta in 1824, with weekly services, as the start of his 'Universal Religion'. From about this time, Roy described himself as a 'Hindu Unitarian'.

However, the Unitarian Mission did not prosper, and Roy came to see that a Universal Religion without a local or national character, was unlikely to thrive. Roy and his followers set up their first Samaj in Calcutta in 1828, and then the *Brahmo Samaj* in January 1830. This had a Bengali character, but it was stressed it was non-sectarian, for the worship of the 'One True God'. Services consisted of readings from the Vedas and Upanishads, Brahmo adoration and prayers (many of which showed Biblical influence), singing (which was a controversial innovation), meditation and an address or sermon.

Later that year (1830) Roy set sail for England, where he continued to press for reforms in India. He had the satisfaction of seeing an appeal against the abolition of *suttee* rejected by the first sitting of the Reformed Parliament in London early in 1833. He was feted by the establishment in England, but he also sought out Unitarians. While visiting the Carpenters in Bristol later in 1833, he contracted meningitis and died there.

So what of the faith he founded? Roy saw it as a universal religion, which combined essential elements of three great world religions: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The fundamental principles of the *Brahmo Samaj*, are:

1. Belief in one God, the creator and saviour of the world, who is infinite in power, wisdom, love and justice. God is omnipresent, is everywhere, yet is without form, and is beyond our conception. But God reveals himself to us ‘through nature, through the spirit of man and through the collective spirit of humanity’.

2. The human soul is immortal and capable of infinite progress. This concept of immortality and the progress of the soul comes from Hinduism, but the *Brahmo Samaj* does not believe in re-birth. The progress of the soul is towards an eventual union with God, ‘not absorption, but a perfect harmony’. There is no heaven and hell, these are states not places.

3. Man’s happiness in this world and the next consists in worshipping God in spirit and in truth. Knowing and loving God is defined as ‘man’s highest destiny’ while to serve God is ‘the highest privilege’. Worship is ‘a most sacred and solemn duty’.

4. Loving God, holding communion with him and carrying out his will in all the concerns of life, constitute true worship. Divine Will is the Divine Spirit acting in humans. “When it breathes through Reason, it is wisdom enabling us to perceive the true; when flowing through Conscience, it is virtue, giving us a sense and knowledge of the right; when operating through the affections it is love, leading us to seek the good of others; and when influencing the Will it is courage, giving us firmness to stand on duty.”

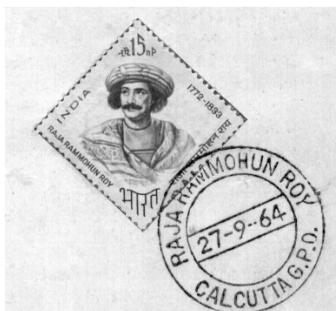
5. ‘No created object is to be worshipped as God and God alone is considered infallible.’ But true prophets can be honoured as manifestations of the nature of God (– ‘in whose image and out of whose substance, humanity is created’.)

The *Brahmo Samaj* emphasises Liberty, Rationality, Universality and Spirituality. It describes itself as universal in its principles, but ‘national and local in its external forms’.

“Its God is not enthroned in yonder skies or in a place called heaven, but is living in the soul, as a silent witness of its conscience, ruling and guiding its inward life ... (the Supreme Being) is immanent

in matter and mind. His is a besetting Presence, within and without, behind and before, with us ‘today and tomorrow’ ... He can be loved and adored – and in this love and adoration is religion.” Devotion within the home is central to Brahma worship, with prayers for the family, in the morning, at bath-time, before meals and bed. The divine suffuses all aspects of life.

Can modern Unitarians learn from the *Brahmo Samaj*? Our two faiths have always had strong similarities: belief in One God, open and creedless, the emphasis on liberty and reason. Both have been deeply engaged in social reform – and in India, the *Brahmo Samaj* still run schools and orphanages. On the downside, neither of our



denominations realised their ambitions of winning over large numbers from their ‘mother faiths’. Both remain small. But our denominations had a big influence on their societies – especially, it must be admitted, the *Brahmo Samaj*.

However, there are important differences between our two faiths today, especially regarding attitudes towards God and worship. The growth of secularism in Western Europe has affected all parts of our society, including the churches. Many Unitarians in Britain and the United States have embraced secularism – finding belief in God difficult; and moving away from devotional worship altogether. The *Brahmo Samaj* has not.

I think we Unitarians have to ask ourselves whether this shift has ultimately been of benefit. Could we be missing something? Obviously we should not practise what we cannot believe in. Most of us long ago rejected the over-simplified versions of religion we grew up with – and for good reason. But I wonder if the *Brahmo Samaj* and modern radical Christians might help us find a way forward – to a faith closer to Roy’s universal religion, where belief in the sacred –and even devotion – might still be embraced?

Marcus Borg is a New Testament scholar in the United States, one of the great popularisers of a radical Christianity that I feel speaks to us today. Borg explained his own transformation from youthful

traditional Christian to agnostic and finally to a re-formed faith following a series of ecstatic experiences he called ‘nature mysticism.’ Borg writes:

. . . these experiences gave me a new understanding of the meaning of the world God. I realised that ‘God’ does not refer to a supernatural being ‘out there’. Rather I began to see that the word ‘God’ refers to ‘the sacred’ at the centre of existence, the ‘holy mystery’ which is all around us and within us. God is the non-material ground and source and presence in which ‘we live and move and have our being’.

Whether we can go this far or not, let us be open to the idea that divinity is all around us, and within us, as we go out into the world once more.

Let us cherish the sacred in ourselves and in others – and in every living creature. Amen.

Jim Corrigan is Chair of *Golders Green Unitarians* and a member of the UCA.

A number of Roy’s texts can be found at <http://www.archive.org>  
Simply search their texts for Raja Rammohun Roy.



## THE PREFACE TO THE PRECEPTS OF JESUS

### *THE GUIDE TO PEACE AND HAPPINESS*

Reproduced here is the Preface to **Ram Mohan Roy’s** edited version of the Gospels published in 1820.

A conviction in the mind of its total ignorance of the nature and of the specific attributes of the Godhead, and a sense of doubt respecting the real essence of the soul, give rise to feelings of great dissatisfaction with our limited powers, as well as with all human requirements which fail to inform us on these interesting points.—On the other hand, a notion of the existence of a supreme superintending power, the author and preserver of this harmonious system who has organized and who regulates such an infinity of celestial and terrestrial objects; and a due estimation of that law which teaches that man should do unto others as he would wish to be done by, reconcile us to human nature, and tend to render our existence agreeable to ourselves and profitable to the rest of mankind. The former of these sources of satisfaction, viz. a belief in God, prevails generally; being derived either from tradition or instruction, or from an attentive survey of the

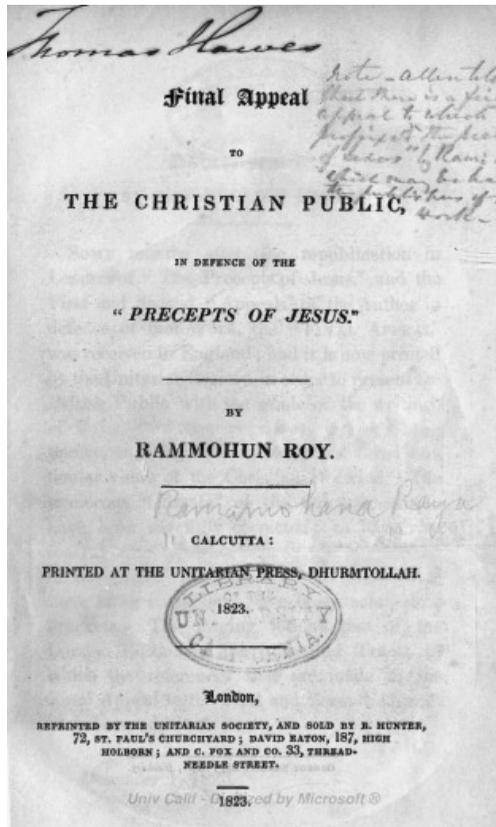
wonderful skill and contrivance displayed in the works of nature. The latter, although it is partially taught also in every system of religion with which I am acquainted is principally inculcated by Christianity. This essential characteristic of the Christian religion I was for a long time unable to distinguish as such, amidst the various doctrines I found insisted upon in the writings of Christian authors, and in conversation of those teachers of Christianity with whom I have had the honour of holding communication. Amongst those opinions, the most prevalent seems to be, that no one is justly entitled to the appellation of Christian who does not believe in the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Ghost, as well as in the divine nature of God, the Father of all created beings. Many allow a much greater latitude to the term Christian and consider it as comprehending all who acknowledge the Bible to contain the revealed will of God, however they may differ from others in their interpretations of particular passages of scripture; whilst some require from him who claims the title of Christian only an adherence to the doctrines of Christ, as taught by himself, without insisting on implicit confidence in those of the Apostles, as being, except when speaking from inspiration, like other men, liable to mistake and error. That they were so is obvious from the several instances of differences of opinion amongst the Apostles recorded in the Acts and the Epistles.<sup>1</sup>

Voluminous works, written by learned men of particular sects for the purpose of establishing the truth, consistency, rationality, and priority of their own peculiar doctrines, contain such a variety of arguments that I cannot hope to be able to adduce here any new reasonings of sufficient novelty and force to attract the notice of my readers. Besides, in matters of religion particularly, men in general, through prejudice and partiality to the opinions they once form, pay little or no attention to opposite sentiments (however reasonable they may be,) and often turn a deaf ear to what is most consistent with the laws of nature, and conformable to the dictates of human reason and divine revelation. At the same time, to those who are not biassed [sic] by prejudice, and who are, by the grace of God, open to conviction, a

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<sup>1</sup> Vide Acts, ch. Xi. Vers. 2, 3, ch. xv. vers. 2, 7 ; 1 Corinthians, ch. i. ver. 12 ; Galatians, ch. ii. vers. 11—13.

simple enumeration and statement of the particular tenets of different sects may be a sufficient guide to direct their inquiries in ascertaining which of them is the most consistent with the sacred traditions, and most acceptable to common sense.—For these reasons I decline entering into any discussion on those points, and confine my attention at present to laying before my fellow-creatures the words of Christ, with a translation from the English into Sanskrit and the language of Bengal. I feel persuaded that by separating from other matters contained in the New Testament the moral precepts found in that book, these will be more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and minds of different persuasions and degrees of understanding. For, historical and some other passages are liable to the doubts and disputes of free-thinkers and antichristians, especially miraculous relations, which are much less wonderful than the fabricated tales handed down to the natives of Asia,<sup>1</sup> and consequently would be apt at best to carry little weight with them. On the contrary, moral doctrines, tending evidently to the maintenance of peace and harmony of mankind at large, are beyond



<sup>1</sup> Ugisti is famed for having swallowed the ocean, when it had given him offence, and having restored it by urinary evacuation : at his command, also, the Vindhyu range of mountains prostrated itself, and so remains. (*Wilson's Dictionary.*)

the reach of metaphysical perversion, and intelligible alike to the learned and the unlearned. This simple code of religion and morality is so admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of one GOD, who has equally subjected all living creatures, without distinction of cast, rank, or wealth, to change, to disappointment, pain, and death, and has equally admitted all to be partakers of the bountiful mercies which he has lavished over nature, and is also so well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human race in their discharge of their various duties to GOD, to themselves, and to society, that I cannot but hope the best effects from its promulgation in the present form.



### **THREE-HUNDRED YEARS OF DISSENTING WITNESS**

**Andrew Parker** reflects on the proud history of Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross which marks its tercentenary this year.

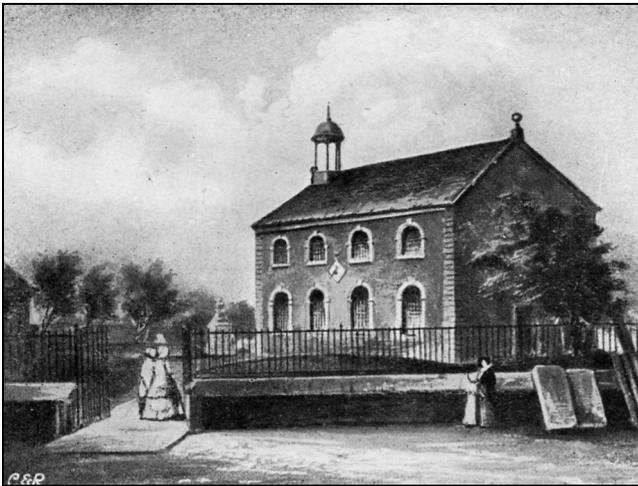
One of our member congregations, Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross, celebrates its tercentenary this year. The present building dates from 1848 but there was a previous building on the site which was built in the year 1708. The town of Hyde cannot really be said to have existed at that date, the name Hyde was attached only to a predominantly rural township.

Gee Cross which straddled the boundary of the townships of Hyde and Werneth was not really large enough to even be called a village. The local population was scattered around the countryside. Gee Cross was then in the parish of Stockport and the parish church was five miles away. This physical isolation from the Established Church was one of the factors which led to the growth of dissenting thought amongst the local gentry and landowners, and amongst their tenants.

There were two chapels-of-ease which were more convenient for the local people, one at Denton under the charge of John Angier and one at Chadkirk under the charge of Gamaliel Jones, both of whom were dissenters. They had been allowed to remain in their livings in 1662 even though both of them had refused to comply with the Act of Uniformity. Over two thousand other clergy had been expelled from the Church of England at that time but these two men were held in such high regard locally that they escaped that fate. Their preaching

was naturally a great influence on the local population. Angier died in 1677 and the Anglican authorities took the opportunity to bring the chapel at Denton back into the fold.

John Angier's successor, his nephew Samuel Angier preached in his own house for a while and also in a barn at Dukinfield until, with the growth of the congregation it was necessary to build a chapel at Dukinfield in 1707. Several families from Gee Cross attended either Chadkirk or Dukinfield until, spurred on by the death of Gamaliel Jones in the early 1700s they considered themselves to be in a strong enough position to build a chapel for themselves.



The Old Chapel

The chapel was built in 1708 on land given by Joshua Thornely and the Trust Deed dated December 1708 states that the chapel was built "...for the benefit of oulde people and children of the inhabitants of the three townes of Hyde, Werneth & Haughton by reason that those three townes are soe distant from their parish churches." Geographical isolation is the only stated reason. It must be remembered that our Presbyterian forebears were reluctant dissenters who always hoped for a truly catholic and comprehensive national Church within which they could be embraced. Partly because of this hope, English Presbyterianism never developed a carefully organised system of Church government as was the case in the Scottish Presbyterian system and their most distinguishing feature was their catholicity.

Indeed, one critic complained that they “admit all sorts of persons that will but say they are Christians into their communion, be they Arminians, Calvinists, Free Thinkers, Arians or Socinians; it is all one to them.”<sup>1</sup> They did indeed admit to Communion all in the area who had some understanding of Christianity and had not disqualified themselves by their way of life. No doctrinal test seems to have been imposed at all. The Rev. John Cooper, first minister of Hyde Chapel (1710–1730) admitted people to Communion after a private interview at which he enquired about their general religious fitness and at which the candidate promised to live a holy life. One entry in his register states: “My wife admitted, consented and promised to act as becomes a Christian. May 15th 1714.”<sup>2</sup>

The cost of building the chapel was £43 2s 6d, which even for 1708 was low. Much of the carting of material and building work was done by members. It was a low stone building sixteen yards by eight with a gallery at the east end reached by steps on the outside. There were no pews, just benches with backs attached. It was enlarged in 1767 with the addition of a second gallery and a small vestry and the chapel could then seat two-hundred and ninety.

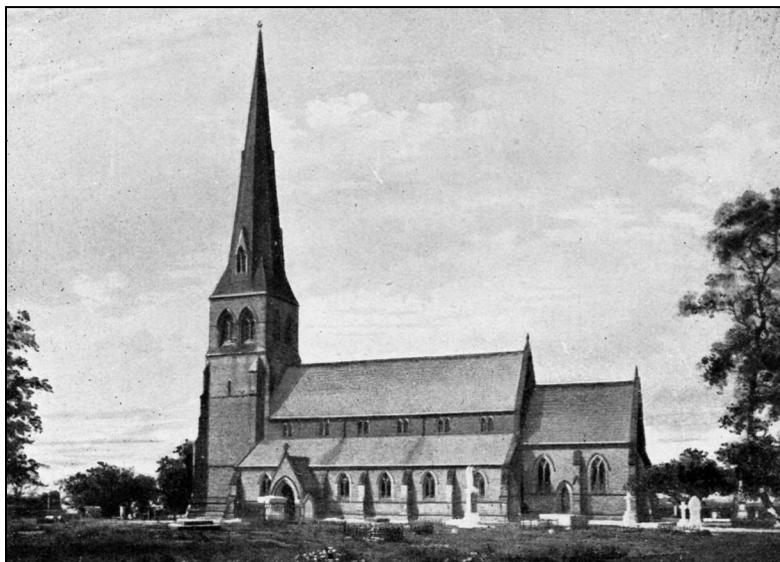
This building remained in use until it was replaced by the present magnificent building in 1848. During that hundred and thirty years the population of the area had increased dramatically and some of the chapel’s members had made their fortunes from the growth of the cotton industry. Gee Cross was becoming a suburb of the growing industrial town of Hyde and there was a general feeling that the old chapel no longer reflected the changed nature of the local community or its aspirations. The passing of the Dissenters’ Chapels Act in 1844 meant that the congregation, by then largely unitarian in their beliefs were able to feel secure in the possession of the building and funds of their more orthodox Presbyterian forebears. In that same year the decision was taken to build a new chapel which would declare to all

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<sup>1</sup> 1 From a 1732 manuscript quoted by Jeremy Goring in *The English Presbyterians*, London 1968, p 178

<sup>2</sup> Manuscript memoirs of the Reverend James Brooks, minister of Hyde Chapel 1806–1854.

who saw it that the nonconformists of Gee Cross were as established in society as anyone else.



The New Chapel

Work began in 1846 and the new chapel was opened on July 5th 1848 and the old chapel was demolished soon afterwards. The architects of the new building were Bowman and Crowther who at the time had an apprentice working for them, Thomas Worthington, who went on in his later career to design a whole series of Unitarian churches and chapels in the second half of the nineteenth century. His influence is clearly seen at Hyde Chapel and a series of watercolour perspectives of the building by Worthington still have pride of place within the chapel.

Built of stone, the style is partly early English. Apart from the omission of a central aisle it is an attempt to create a faithful reproduction of a medieval parish church set within its own extensive graveyard. It was the first non-conformist place of worship in the country to be so entirely a copy of a building for the Established Church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pevsner, Nikolaus, *The Buildings of England: Cheshire*, 1971, p 247

There is a nave with north and south aisles divided by rows of clustered pillars and gothic arches which support the clerestory. The beautiful chancel contains a highly decorated stone altar (sic), sedilia, correctly positioned on the south side and a fine series of stained glass windows showing scenes from the life of Christ. The large, ornate font with its intricately carved wooden canopy which can be raised with one finger by a finely balanced system of pulleys is incorrectly, though very effectively placed in the chancel. The large east window above the altar depicting Christ crowned in glory is not the original. It was installed in 1917 as a tribute to The Rev. Henry Enfield Dowson who had completed fifty years of ministry at Hyde Chapel. The tower and spire rise to a height of 145 feet and there is one bell in the tower, the largest bell in Hyde, but sadly it is no longer used.

The graveyard surrounding the chapel is extensive and there is still a large area remaining for new burials. Many of the founders of modern Hyde were members of the chapel in the nineteenth century and are buried in the old part of chapel yard, amongst them Thomas Ashton, first Mayor of Hyde and Thomas Gair Ashton, 1st Baron Ashton of Hyde. The Potter family were also associated with the chapel and Rupert and Helen Potter (Beatrix Potter's parents) were married at the chapel and are buried in the chapel yard.

The long ministry of The Rev Henry Enfield Dowson (1867–1925) saw the chapel established as one of the principal places of worship in the town. Mr Dowson himself was so respected that he was granted the Freedom of the Borough of Hyde and, in 1921, at the unveiling of the Hyde War Memorial it was Mr Dowson, not one the local Anglican clergy, who was called upon to dedicate the memorial.

I recall from my own younger days that older members of the congregation who could remember the grand old man would always speak of him in hushed, reverential tones, and referred to him as Mr Dowson, a mark of respect that I am happy to continue.

The original Hyde Chapel was one of the first buildings in Gee Cross and the bulk of the settlement sprang up around it and so the present chapel now occupies pride of place on the main road in the centre of the village. Gee Cross did not get a parish church of its own until 1874 and the building (pointedly dedicated to the Holy Trinity) is smaller and less impressive than Hyde Chapel and hidden away up a

narrow side street.

Throughout its three hundred year history the chapel has remained true to the tradition of catholicity of its Presbyterian founders. Following the precept of James Martineau the congregation has always refused to label itself as Unitarian and continues to maintain that no label other than Christian is required and no name other than Hyde Chapel is appropriate.

### **Tercentenary Celebrations 2008**

Hyde Chapel (Car park on Knott Lane) Gee Cross,  
Hyde, Cheshire SK14 5SQ

#### *Beatrix Potter Exhibition*

Friday June 20th and Saturday June 21st  
11am–4pm both days. Free admission.

#### *Guided tour of the chapel and grounds (led by The Rev Andrew Parker)*

Friday June 20th at 2 pm

#### *Tercentenary Celebration Service*

Saturday July 5th at 2.30 pm. All welcome

Andrew Parker is the minister of *Stalybridge Unitarian Church* and Membership Secretary of the UCA.



## BOOK REVIEW: THE CREEDS RE-EXAMINED

*Tokens of Trust* by Rowan Williams (Canterbury Press, 2007)

In this review **Jim Corrigan** suggests that the Archbishop of Canterbury's re-interpretations of basic doctrines points a way towards overcoming historic divisions.

This book is likely to be of particular interest to Unitarian and Free Christians for a number of reasons, not least because it offers a re-examination of the basic Creeds of orthodox Christianity by the leading churchman of the worldwide Anglican community – a man known as a religious liberal.

The way in which Rowan Williams approaches the two Creeds – the Nicene and the Apostles' – highlights both important similarities and differences between orthodox liberal Christians such as himself, and those who have long rejected creeds, like Unitarians, Free Christians and Quakers.

This little book is based on a series of talks the Archbishop gave at Canterbury Cathedral in the run-up to Easter three years ago. Happily, it retains a conversational style, which makes it easier to digest than some of the Archbishop's more convoluted writings!

Rowan Williams spells out his view that the basis of Christian belief is *knowing* who and what to trust, starting with God: "Once you have taken that step of trust, the doctrine flows out of that." So trust comes before creed, and, crucially, before church also. That the church can and does get things wrong is one theme of the book.

The Archbishop of Canterbury goes on to pose the perfectly valid question: "Why should one put one's trust in God?" This book is his attempt to provide an answer. His initial responses would probably satisfy most religious people. He writes of 'an indestructible energy making for love' lying 'at the foundation of everything', including suffering.

On the question of why an all-powerful God does not prevent the suffering caused by evil and disasters, Williams writes that his understanding is of a God 'whose almighty power is more of a steady swell of loving presence, always there at work in the centre of everything that is, opening the door to a future even when we can see no hope.' It is through that loving presence that healing and renewal

take place.

He attempts to tackle the intellectual challenge of whether God exists, putting forward strong arguments while conceding that this is not a matter for ‘proof.’ He argues that when the Creeds talk of God as ‘Maker of Heaven and Earth’, this does not refer simply to the historical act of creation but rather that ‘the creation is going on now’.

“It means that within every circumstance, every object, every person, God’s action is going on, a sort of white heat at the centre of everything. It means that each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we’ve ever thought about it. It means that every object or person we encounter is in a relationship with God before they’re in a relationship with us. And if that doesn’t make us approach the world and other people with reverence and amazement, I don’t know what will,” writes Williams.

But the fascination is in seeing how a leading liberal Christian – who is bound by orthodoxy – explains the most difficult aspects of orthodox faith: the Miracles, Virgin Birth, Trinity, Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Judgement.

It must be said that Williams is very much a modern orthodox scholar, and much of the language and imagery of traditional Christianity – of Satan, of Heaven and Hell – is eschewed. He does however defend the key orthodoxies of the Anglican faith, often with great subtlety, but in the end Unitarian and Free Christians are unlikely to be won over.

However, in his willingness to embrace metaphorical meanings, sometimes at the expense of the literal, and to resort to poetry when all other words fail, Williams moves close to the discourse of modern religious dissenters. One feels that many of the historic divisions between the orthodox and the free-thinkers are not of great importance any more.

The BBC broadcaster John Humphrys found Rowan Williams most unconvincing when he interviewed him during his famous quest to find out whether God exists. Humphrys was quite scathing afterwards about what he saw as Williams’ feeble persuasive powers. But, reading Williams, one feels it is the fluidity and subtlety of his arguments that gives them their strength.

Williams is unlike that other orthodox Anglican writer, C.S. Lewis

– who, at his worst, attempts to convince through philosophic hectoring. The ruminative approach of Williams has great merit, but if it were a case of who best to take on the Grand Inquisitor Humphrys, then C.S. Lewis would certainly have been the pugilist for the job!



## DIARY DATES & NEWS UCA PRAYER-BOOK & TIE

**T**he 7th Synod of the of the Unitarian Christian Association will be held at Birmingham New Meeting on Saturday 2nd August 2008 at 2pm. Further details will be posted on the website as soon as they are available.

**T**he UCA prayer-book is now available. It is called *Daybreak and Eventide, A Little Book of Prayers and Worship for Individuals, Small Groups and House Churches* by Andrew J. Brown and John C. Morgan.

You may obtain it by sending a crossed cheque for £9.99 (RRP £14.99) plus £1 P&P made payable to the *Unitarian Christian Association* to Sandra Wilson, 1 Fairview Grove, Swaffham Prior, Cambridgeshire, CB25 0LB.

**UCA Tie.** You can now show your support for the *Unitarian Christian Association* by wearing the newly-available U.C.A. Tie. Woven in England from 100% Polyester, it is navy blue with a diagonal pinstripe and the UCA logo woven into it in gold. When tied the logo falls neatly below the knot. The tie is full-length (60") and measures 3¼" at its broadest part. ONLY £10.00 including postage. To order one please send a cheque made payable to *The Unitarian Christian Association* to:

Ian Bradbury, 6 Huddersfield Road Stalybridge, Cheshire, SK 15 2QA

### KEY UNITARIAN TEXTS FREELY AVAILABLE ONLINE

**O**ne of the real problems for anyone wanting to learn about the Unitarian tradition is the difficulty of obtaining basic texts which have been out of print for many years.

However, if you go to the following website you will find many treasures. Do please note that that the *PDF* files are big and so will require a broadband connection to download with ease but often smaller *text* and *html* files are also available.

First go to: <http://www.archive.org/index.php>

Then click on *Texts* at the top of the page, type *Unitarian* into the Search box and hit *Go*.

## CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERS GREAT BRITAIN

**Bolton**, Halliwell Road Free Church, Halliwell Road, Bolton, Lancs.  
10.30 am & 6.30 pm. [www.halliwell-unitarians-bolton.org.uk](http://www.halliwell-unitarians-bolton.org.uk)

**Cambridge**, The Memorial Church, Emmanuel Road, Cambridge  
CB1 1JW 10.30 am & 6.30 pm (Four communion services per year,  
Christmas Eve, Good Friday, Whitsunday and during Harvest)  
[www.cambridgeunitarian.org](http://www.cambridgeunitarian.org)

**Dean Row (Wilmslow)**, Dean Row Chapel, Dean Row, Wilmslow,  
Cheshire. 11.15 am

**Dundee**, Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church, Dudhope  
Street, Dundee. DD1 1JT. 11 am. [www.dundee-unitarians.org.uk](http://www.dundee-unitarians.org.uk)

**Failsworth**, Dob Lane Chapel, Oldham Road, Failsworth, Manchester.  
9.30 am

**Great Yarmouth**, Old Meeting (Unitarian), Greyfriars Way, Great  
Yarmouth, NR30 2SW 3 pm (1st & 3rd Sundays each month).  
[www.unitarian.org.uk/eu/gtyarmouth](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/eu/gtyarmouth)

**Hale Barns**, Hale Chapel, 60 Chapel Lane, Hale Barns, Altrincham,  
Cheshire. WA15 0HT. 9.30 am. [www.halechapel.org](http://www.halechapel.org)

**Hyde**, Flowery Field Church, Newton Street, Hyde, Cheshire. SK14  
4NP. 2.30 pm (Communion 1st Sunday each month)  
[www.unitarian.org.uk/ecu/FloweryField](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/ecu/FloweryField)

**Hyde**, Hyde Chapel, Knott Lane, Gee Cross, Hyde, Cheshire. SK14  
5SQ. 11 am (Communion 1st Sunday each month)  
[www.unitarian.org.uk/ecu/hydechapel](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/ecu/hydechapel)

**Knutsford**, Brook Street Chapel, Adams Hill, Knutsford. WA16 5DY.  
11 am.

**Leeds, Mill Hill Chapel**, City Square, Leeds. LS1 5EB. 10.45 am  
[www.millhillchapel.org.uk](http://www.millhillchapel.org.uk)

**London (Brixton)**, Effra Road Chapel, 63 Effra Road, Brixton,  
London. SW2 1BZ. 10.30 am.  
[www.unitarian.org.uk/ldpa/brixton](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/ldpa/brixton)

**London (Hampstead)**, Rosslyn Hill Chapel, 3 Pilgrim's Place,  
Hampstead. NW3 7NG. 11 am & 7 pm. [www.rosslynhillchapel.com](http://www.rosslynhillchapel.com)

**Oxford**, Manchester College Chapel Society, Harris Manchester  
College, Mansfield Rd, Oxford, OX1 3TD. 11 am.  
[www.oxfordunitarians.org.uk](http://www.oxfordunitarians.org.uk)

**Padiham**, Nazareth Chapel, Knight Hill, Church Street, Padiham. BB12 8JH. 10.30 am. [www.padiham-unitarians.org.uk](http://www.padiham-unitarians.org.uk)

**Stalybridge**, Stalybridge Unitarian Church, Forester Drive, Stalybridge, Cheshire. 11 am. [www.stalybridgeunitarians.org.uk](http://www.stalybridgeunitarians.org.uk)



## THE NON-SUBSCRIBING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF IRELAND

[www.nspresbyterian.org](http://www.nspresbyterian.org)

### PRESBYTERY OF ANTRIM

**Ballyclare**, Old Presbyterian Church, Main Street, Ballyclare. 10.15am

**Ballymoney**, NSP Congregation. Services, as arranged.

**Belfast**, All Souls, Elmwood Avenue, Belfast. 11.30am

**Belfast**, First Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street, Belfast. 10.30am.

**Cairncastle**, Old Presbyterian Church, Cairncastle. 12.15pm.

**Crumlin**, Old Presbyterian Church, Main Street, Crumlin. 3pm.

**Downpatrick**, First Presbyterian Church, Stream Street, Downpatrick. 11.15am.

**Dunmurry**, First Presbyterian Church, Glebe Road, Dunmurry. 11.30am.

**Glenarm**, Old Presbyterian Church, Ballymena Road, Glenarm. 11am.

**Greyabbey**, First (NS) Presbyterian Church, Main Street, Greyabbey. 10.30am.

**Holywood**, First (NS) Presbyterian Church, High Street, Holywood. 12 noon.

**Newtownards**, NS Presbyterian Church, Victoria Avenue, Newtownards. 12 noon.

### PRESBYTERY OF BANGOR

**Ballee**, NS Presbyterian Church, Ballee, Downpatrick. 9.45am.

**Ballyhemlin**, Meeting House, Ballyhalbart. 3pm, 1st & 3rd Sundays.

**Banbridge**, First Presbyterian Church, Downshire Road, Banbridge. 10am.

**Belfast**, Mountpottinger NS Presbyterian Church, Belfast. 10.30am.

**Clough**, NS Presbyterian Church, Castlewellan Road, Clough. 9.45am (2nd & 4th) & 11.15am. (1st, 3rd & 5th Sundays)

**Comber**, NS Presbyterian Church, Windmill Hill, Comber. 12 noon.

**Dromore**, First Presbyterian Church, Rampart Street, Dromore. 11.30am.

**Killinchy**, NS Presbyterian Church, Comber Road, Killinchy.  
11.30am.

**Moira**, First (NS) Presbyterian Church, Meeting Street, Moira.  
11.30am, 2nd & last Sundays.

**Moneyreagh**, NS Presbyterian Church, Church Road, Moneyreagh.  
12 noon.

**Newry**, First (NS) Presbyterian, Needham Place, Newry. 11.30am.

**Rademon**, First Kilmore Church, Kilmore, Crossgar. 10am.

**Ravara**, NS Presbyterian Church, Saintfield Road, Ballygowan. 3.30pm  
last Sunday.

**Warrenpoint**, First Presbyterian Church, Burren Road, Warrenpoint.  
3pm, 1st & 3rd Sundays.

#### **SYNOD OF MUNSTER**

**Cork**, Unitarian Church, Prince's Street, Cork. 11am.

**Dublin**, Unitarian Church, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin. 11am



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