

# THE HERALD

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*Commemorating Lindsey at UCA Lance Garrard Lecture:  
Jeff Gould, Sarah Tinker and Grayson Ditchfield at  
Essex Church, Kensington. See p.7 & p.10*

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## Editorial: Making ourselves indispensable

I must begin with an apology for the long gap since *The Herald* last appeared. The previous editor, the Revd Andrew Brown, who held the post with distinction for several years, has stepped down. I have accepted an invitation from the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) to be guest editor for this edition.

I’m pleased it’s a ‘bumper issue’, with a variety of articles. The UCA intends that *The Herald* should come out more regularly in future, although probably less frequently than quarterly. But it will be supplemented by colourful *UCA Newsletters*, which have already made a welcome appearance.

What then to highlight as my theme, what over-arching concern comes to mind? Well, I’d like to examine an oft-stated aim of the UCA, one that sounds modest enough, namely to be a ‘resource’ for our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination. We think here of providing publications, worship materials, prayers and hymns in the liberal Christian spirit, a valuable goal, but perhaps a rather limited one. But what if we could go further – and provide the resources to save our denomination from a slow death, if we could reveal strategies to make growth a reality? Is this possible?

Before I develop my argument, let me briefly highlight two matters. The first is coverage in this edition of commemorations last November for the bicentenary of the death of our Unitarian founder, Theophilus Lindsey, held at Essex Church, Kensington – including the full text of Professor Grayson Ditchfield’s magisterial Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture. The second is to note the endorsement by our General Assembly at its Annual Meetings in Chester in April of a new ‘Heads of Agreement’ with the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (NSPCI), which reaffirms historic links between our two denominations. It’s a matter of pride that the Unitarian Christian Association helped pave the way for this accord with its own formal affiliation to the NSPCI two years ago.

But am I getting diverted? Well not entirely, because there was another – less welcome – decision taken at the Annual Meetings, namely to go for a more snappy ‘brand-name’ for our denomination, which may result in dropping the ‘Free Christian’ part of our name – although not from our full, legal title. Does this matter? Well if we had a clear hold on our ‘free Christian’ heritage, perhaps not. But unfortunately we seem to have forgotten this tradition almost completely, and that’s the problem.

Why? Because it is *this* tradition that could save our denomination. We currently look in vain for sources of serious numerical growth and yet appear uninterested in the convulsions gripping the Anglican Church – in Britain and worldwide. Bigotry and tolerance, fundamentalism and liberalism are doing battle – and we seem unconcerned! Of course our congregations continue to take in a few ‘refugees’ from the Anglican fold, but what if serious splits and divisions develop? Where will we be then?

Yet the goal of the Free Christians was to build the ‘Church Universal’, a church beyond dogma for all Christians. This may seem a hopeless dream now, but it probably did too when the English Presbyterian leader Richard Baxter began his quest for a re-union with the Established Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, a goal he almost achieved! This tradition was revived among Unitarians by James Martineau in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and it continued into early last century. (Martineau’s influence is discussed in Grayson Ditchfield’s lecture, while Jeff Gould’s address -- also printed in this edition – considers our Free Christian legacy.)

Let us record that many Unitarian Christians (and others) are today working hard to build relations with mainstream Christianity, but surely our whole denomination should be doing this? This need not mean dropping our ‘inter-faith’ work, far from it, but rather realising the potential of our liberal religious heritage – in the present and in the future. We’ll never know what we could achieve unless we try.

**Jim Corrigan is a newly-elected Executive Committee member of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.**

***Are you interested in the liberal Christian tradition?  
Do you want to see it continue and flourish within our  
Unitarian denomination?  
Have you considered joining the Unitarian Christian  
Association? We welcome new members!***

*Details of how to join are to be found at the back of this edition  
on page 34*

# Moderator's Report: A sea-change ahead

Dear Friends, as Ecclesiastes tells us, to every thing there is a time and a season, and this edition marks a farewell and a welcome. The farewell is to our retiring editor, Andrew Brown, who has produced and commissioned articles of quality and variety for the last few years. Thank you, Andrew, for all your excellent work. We now welcome Jim Corrigan as our guest editor, bringing with him his journalistic skills and expertise for which we are most grateful.

By travelling to different parts of the country, the Officer Group of the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) is trying to meet the needs of all our members (and potential newcomers). Recent Synods have met in Birmingham and London and our Synod in July is being held in Wales. It may be that in the future, smaller sub-groups may be able to meet in their own districts.

The work of the UCA is done by a fairly small group of people, both members of the Officer Group and other dedicated helpers. At times over the past few years, it has been enough just to keep going as an institution. However, I think I sense a sea-change coming, both for us and for the wider Unitarian denomination. Our membership is picking up, and a greater interest is being shown in the Christian inheritance of our liberal faith.

Christianity is the root from which our Unitarian tradition has grown, whose spiritual riches and economic and social radicalism inspired some of our greatest theologians, thinkers and social activists, from Joseph Priestley onwards. Our commitment to spiritual freedom comes from the notion that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom', and our history of radical inclusiveness comes from the spirit of Jesus who said that 'He or she who is not against you is for you'. Unitarians and Free Christians have always shown a greater interest in the life and teachings of Jesus rather than theological systems which obscure his fundamental message.

The aim of the Unitarian Christian Association is to act as a resource to the Unitarian movement so that the message of Jesus may continue to act as a light to religious liberals who seek us out as a spiritual community. In the spirit of words from the Sermon on the Mount, may we continue to be a lamp that shines and gives light to all our friends in the household of our Unitarian faith.

**The Revd Alex Bradley is Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, and Minister at Knutsford and Styal in Cheshire. He is the newly-appointed Principal of Unitarian College Manchester.**



# Synod hears of membership boost

The UCA Synod at Padiham in late March began with a focus on women in the time of Jesus. And as **Jim Corrigan** reports, the day was a particularly happy one.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) held at Nazareth Chapel in Padiham, Lancashire, in late March, began with a fine soup lunch provided by our hosts. Then followed intellectual nourishment: a workshop on 'Women in the time of Jesus' led by the host Minister, the Revd Jean McNeile.

Jean drew on Gospel accounts to illustrate different ways in which women and men witnessed their faith towards Jesus. Among topics that emerged in the subsequent discussion were feminine and masculine aspects of our worship.



*The Rev Jean McNeile leads a discussion during her workshop on 'Women in the time of Jesus' at the UCA Synod at Padiham, with the Rev Alex Bradley on her left.  
(Photo by Jim Corrigan)*

It should be recorded that the day was particularly happy – for reasons I will relate later.

In reports to the Synod (which was also the UCA's annual general meeting), it was revealed that UCA membership has risen in the past two years to stand at 156. The Membership Development Officer, Cathy Fozard, said the most dramatic rise had been in London, where numbers had doubled in the past year. (This district – together with South-East England and the 'home counties' -- is now the

second strongest in Britain in terms of UCA membership, after the North-West.)

The meeting heard of several recent events in London which had helped build growth. These included a Jesus Retreat and a Synod at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, and the Theophilus Lindsey commemoration service at Essex Church, Kensington, which was followed by the UCA's Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture there. The Events Officer, the Revd Jeff Gould, paid warm tribute to the host congregations of these gatherings and he said the broad attendance had shown that rifts within our denomination were being overcome.

The Moderator, the Revd Alex Bradley, told the meeting that other highlights of the year had included attendance at the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland's Synod at Dublin Unitarian Church, and the holding of a Synod in Birmingham. He emphasised

that the UCA aims to be a ‘resource’ for the entire General Assembly, and he confirmed that the Association continues to provide book grants to all ministry students.

The meeting elected ministry student Bob Pounder as the new Publications Officer, while Cathy Fozard was elected Treasurer (following the resignation of Sandra Wilson from this post).

Alex Bradley announced that the next Synod would be held in the west of Wales – on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July at Graig Unitarian Chapel, Llandysul, Ceredigion. The 13 Unitarian congregations in that area were all Welsh-speaking and would be co-ordinating the day themselves. Much of the proceedings would be in Welsh, but all Unitarians would be ‘as welcome as ever’ to attend, he said.

The day ended with a service in Nazareth Chapel conducted by Jean McNeile, which included a moving sermon (it appears below).

- As I said earlier, the mood at the Padiham Synod was most happy. This was, I believe, because of two announcements which had just been made: first, the engagement of the Revds Alex Bradley and Jean McNeile, with their marriage planned for the summer; and, second, the appointment of Alex Bradley as Principal of Unitarian College Manchester.

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



## ‘Hold on to that gift of love’

In a sermon at the end of the UCA Synod in Padiham, **Jean McNeile** finds inspiration in the ministry of Jesus and his earliest disciples.

*‘Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.’ (Acts 2: 44).*

The image of Jesus varies greatly within the Christian Church worldwide. I do not mean within the established Christian Church, with all its rules and creeds, but for each individual who considers herself or himself a Christian, there are thousands of images. I have known Christians who believe they have such an intimate relationship with Jesus that he not only helps them get bargains from the supermarket and finds them a parking place, but that he also changes the traffic lights green for them!

My idea of Christianity is a craving for those times when Jesus was still alive. I wish I could have been one of those who knew him. It wouldn’t have mattered much to me if I had been in the background, it would have been wonderful to have been, as we say

nowadays, in his space. It's not the details of Jesus' life that matter to me, not what colour eyes he had, but his ministry.

His ministry really lit people up, they must have truly believed that this was the answer, that there would be heaven right here and now. They were ready for something good to happen, their country wasn't free, the priests were in league with the Roman authorities, the politics must have been as corrupt as unfortunately, we so often discover, they are in our own time. And when we consider humanity, regardless of which nation or period, those in power seem oblivious to the weak and powerless.

But in Jesus' time, his message hit the spot, well certainly enough to change the world, but not enough to get world peace and food for all. We still haven't managed to listen to his teachings about loving God and our neighbour yet! But I have faith that one day we may find heaven here on this earth.

And in the meantime, what now? We are a small group of people gathered here in fellowship and faith. But why are we so small? Well, my vest-pocket philosophy is that it is because it is very hard to be a Unitarian Christian. Not an established Christian where you have to keep to the rules and if you don't you are out. Not the established Christianity where you are told what to believe. No, the Christianity where we choose to be Christian, where we make a decision of conscience to live a certain way. And we all know, it is not easy!

It's hard to live by the teachings of Jesus because it is much easier not to. We are positively encouraged by our society to crave ownership and to be competitive, to show off our material goods and boast about our successes. And yet, I always think that most of us consider at some point in our lives (and it may be during a tragedy, or even in those last few weeks of life) how unimportant all those belongings and boasts were. What did they do for us? What was the point?

For me, the point of living a Christian life is to be nearer to God, for simply being nearer to God gives me such peace, such happiness, and surely that is what every one of us wants? We can all live a good life, we can all live well without considering ourselves to be more important than others, if we come into a community of faith and love. And I believe that is what we have here today: a small group of people of like-minded faith. And for that I am so grateful.

For it was the open, loving Christian-based faith that drew me to joining the Unitarian Christian Association, it was God's love in action that I saw and that I try to emulate in my life, that caused me to join. James Martineau says: 'Between soul and soul, even the greatest and the least, there can be, in the things of righteousness and love, no lordship and servitude, but the sublime sympathy of joint worship on the several steps of a never-ending ascent.' (*The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p356)

I believe in our small way we are a community who are in joint worship, who are ascending to God's love. And, yes, we are a small a group, and perhaps we should

worry about that, but I say ‘no’. For in those early years of Jesus’ teachings, the small groups then had no opportunity to get on to committees, or to be concerned with buildings and power and conflict.

So I say to you today, let us keep our intimacy, let us keep our simplicity and let’s be happy with our small status if that’s what we have. But if our Association grows, then we can celebrate the fact that there will be more loving kindness around us. But, large or small, we must never lose our faith, nor the God-given gift of love in our beloved Unitarian Christian Community. May this be so. Amen.

**The Revd Jean McNeile is minister at Nazareth Chapel, Padiham, and is Retreats Officer for the UCA.**



## Finding riches within our diversity

Two major events took place at Essex Church, Kensington, West London, on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2008, marking the bicentennial of our Unitarian founder, Theophilus Lindsey. The first was a morning service led by the Essex Church Minister, the Revd Sarah Tinker. Here the guest preacher was **Jeff Gould**, who drew lessons from his own faith journey.

You may have heard or seen the Orange mobile telephone company’s current advertising campaign that proclaims the message: ‘I am who I am because of everyone.’ It is a very effective slogan. I think it comes from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s famous line from his poem, *In Memoriam*: ‘I am a part of all that I have met’.

This is true of each of us here this morning, and of our liberal religious movement, that rather unwieldy animal that is known as the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. As a religious phenomenon that arose out of the challenges of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and was given a clearer identity through the Act of Uniformity of 1662, the Act of Toleration of 1689 and the Trinity Act of 1813, it has spent a good deal of its energy over the years responding to critics from *outside* its ranks.

Today, however, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, post-Christian culture of Britain, more column inches, heated conversations and prayerful moments of anxiety are produced by debates *within* our denomination. We appear, at times, to be uncomfortable with people who claim a religious identity in our fellowships, societies, chapels or churches that is decidedly Christian. If ‘I am who I am because of everyone’, then we are challenged to admit that our movement is truly diverse, and that our own theological position stands in a field of great variety and richness. This richness informs who we are forever becoming.

Sarah has very kindly asked me to speak about Unitarian Christianity, particularly as it relates to my own personal faith. I hope you will excuse my self-indulgence. If 'I am who I am because of everyone', then I must tell you that I am the product of a rather rich religious background. My mother was a Methodist, my father was a Congregationalist, and I was raised by my paternal grandmother, a German, who had grown up a Lutheran, but on reaching adulthood had embraced the Baha'i faith. The church where I worshipped on a Sunday, however, was the local Congregational meeting house of a small New England town, which had chosen to join the progressive and non-creedal body, the United Church of Christ.

This is the denomination to which the President-elect of the United States, Barack Obama, belongs. It is also the successor to those churches in New England that had wrestled with the Unitarian Controversy early on in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, dealt with it, and moved on, retaining their original name, but incorporating a broader outlook.

The church of my youth was liberal, academic, Biblically-centred, non-creedal and open to both Trinitarian and Unitarian views of God. Oh, and I forgot to mention, somewhere in my family's past (owing to the German connection), there is a discernible Jewish identity! You can now begin to see why 'I am who I am because of everyone' is so relevant to my own faith position.

The 1960s were a heady time in ecumenical circles. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council enabled the local Roman Catholic Church to unite with my own church and the Methodists, to run joint Sunday schools. I can remember Franciscan friars from the local seminary, armed with guitars, leading us in endless choruses of 'Kum-by-yah', and mini-skirted nuns telling us Protestants all about the saints. My childhood experience of religion was open, engaging and inviting. It was also beautifully supportive of my emerging identity as a young gay man. The Bible was not used to oppress or punish me, but to reveal the possibilities of a life of faith.

It was when I was in my first year of university that I began attending a Unitarian church on Sunday mornings, for three reasons: Firstly, I was reading towards a degree in Religious Studies, and was curious about a church that actively engaged with other world religions; secondly, I could be *paid* for teaching Sunday School; and, thirdly, I fell in love with the organist! The Spirit can lead us into unfamiliar territory, and I found myself nurtured by a minister and a congregation that encouraged me to put myself forward for training in ministry.

Now, that's part of my story – the one that led me eventually to serve congregations in this country in the Unitarian tradition, but along the way I found myself on the staff of an Anglican theological college in Berkeley, California, and commissioned by the Anglican Bishop there to conduct a lay chaplaincy in the County Jail and in the County Hospital. What emerges from the story of my own formation in faith is a clear pattern of diversity, but one that is grounded in the Christian perspective. That is the faith I seek to share in my preaching, teaching and occasions of pastoral care, and it is the faith that defines our

own movement, no matter how uncomfortable we may be with its origins and some of its contemporary manifestations.

Ours is a tradition that affirms in its very name the unity of the divine being (God, if you will), and in so doing, celebrates the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. I can remember the upset I caused about four years ago, when I was asked to meet the students of one of our colleges that prepares people for the ministry in order to explain how one can be Christian *and* Unitarian. I began my talk by explaining that I could say, without reservation, that Jesus was my Lord and Saviour. Horrified expressions appeared on a few faces, and the mood in the room became decidedly tense. That is an affirmation I can still make today, but what I mean by it is radically different from what a member of a more orthodox Christian church might assert.

The Jesus of my faith is an historical figure, whose life and ministry have come to generate a faith that does not require historical and quantifiable data to demonstrate its veracity. The truths of Christianity that sustain me are not dependent on historically verifiable events. In short, my faith would not suffer if it were proved that Jesus had not lived. I can be a disciple (that is, one who follows) regardless of whether or not the one I choose to follow is a person of history or of myth. The likelihood that this figure *is* one of history is a cause for joy, but that is not the essence of its truth. I can be an apostle (that is, one who is sent out) because I believe the power of his message is one that is meant to be shared.

My faith is grounded in table fellowship, both symbolically and in reality. It is Christianity's invitation to express a sense of thankfulness through the ritual meal of Holy Communion, and liturgically to underscore the fruits of true fellowship that defines my witness and identity. It is the art of giving thanks for all that one has been given by way of opportunities, relationships and experiences, and then sharing them with others as is done in the course of a meal, that underlines my Unitarian Christianity. It is not a coincidence that the name the early Church used to describe this meal—the Eucharist—originates in the Greek verb 'eucharisto' (I give thanks).

So where is God in all of this? For me, God is the parent of all, who is the source of all life. As such, this God is to be encountered personally, not as the detached clock-maker of the Deist position, but as the one (according to the apostle Paul) 'in whom we live and move and have our very being' [*Acts 17.28*]. It is the perspective of the divine that Jesus offered first-century Judaism, and which stood so starkly in contrast to the emerging rabbinic traditions of his time. This personal perception of God enables me to be in conversation with more Biblically-centred and more creedal Christians, for whom a personal relationship with God and Jesus is so vital.

My Christianity is catholic, not in the Roman sense, but in the universal understanding. You could call me an 'ecu-maniac', in that I derive inspiration and comfort from many different expressions of Christian belief and practice. Our Unitarian and Free Christian tradition has a well-documented history of engaging with the wider Church Universal. It was Theophilus Lindsey's heartfelt hope that his broad and inclusive interpretation of the

Christian Gospel would be an example to the Established Church of his time, and would eventually transform the Church of England into a more comprehensive institution.

The English Presbyterians, led by figures such as Joseph Priestley, were the forebears of many of our congregations. They sought eventual re-union with Anglicanism, and did not wish to be separated from the wider Christian community. The Free Catholic Movement of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was largely a Unitarian and Free Christian desire to demonstrate that denominational barriers were unhelpful in spreading a message of religious tolerance and liberal understanding of Scripture. All people of faith who find inspiration in the life and ministry of Jesus inform my own religious identity.

I confess that Orange is my mobile telephone company, and so I am pleased that its advertising is so closely allied with my own faith. *I am, we are* who we are because of everyone. I invite you to join me in prayer, as we are guided by the words of another Unitarian minister, Andrew Brown:

*'Eternal and Loving God, as we reflect upon this day, with all the frustrations bequeathed to us by present circumstances and birth, may we come to understand that without boundaries and heritage we cannot know who we are, nor what it is we must do. Teach us to see our whole life as a goodly heritage, inspiring us to greater faith and service.'* Amen.

**The Revd Jeffrey Lane Gould is Minister at Bury and Ainsworth, and is UCA Events Officer.**



## The vision of a rational Christianity

*The Unitarian Christian Association's Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture was given at Essex Church, Kensington, on Sunday afternoon, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2008, as part of the Theophilus Lindsey bicentennials. The lecturer was the eminent Lindsey scholar, **Grayson Ditchfield**, and his title: 'From Prayer Book to personal piety: the contribution of Theophilus Lindsey to the emergence of a Unitarian identity'.*

May I thank you for the invitation to give this lecture, named in honour of a distinguished Unitarian scholar whom I was privileged to meet. And indeed may I take the opportunity to thank all those within the Unitarian tradition for the help, advice and generosity which they have shown to someone who does not come from that tradition. Rather than embarrass individuals present today by acknowledging them by name, perhaps I might express gratitude to someone well known to many of us, who, sadly, is not here today. I refer to the Rev. Fred Kenworthy, principal of the Unitarian College, Manchester, who is brought so beautifully to life by Alan Ruston's chapter in *Unitarian to the Core*.

‘From Prayer Book to personal piety’ is a title which I owe to Jim Corrigan and Jeff Gould. Its attractiveness lies in its invocation of a sense of distance and the idea of a journey – and the word ‘journey’ can certainly be applied to Lindsey's life.

By ‘Prayer Book’, of course, we mean the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, with its connotations of Uniformity, imposed by the Act of Uniformity in that same year. Lindsey accepted that Prayer Book and the Church's thirty-nine Articles of doctrine in becoming a university graduate and a clergyman of the Established Church. When he took his BA in 1745, Lindsey subscribed the thirty-nine Articles without demur. He seems to have contemplated no career other than that of Anglican clergyman. Moreover, in his youth, it was widely known that the main Protestant Dissenting denominations were declining in numbers – many Dissenters conformed to the Established Church and two of them, John Potter and Thomas Secker, became archbishops of Canterbury.

By the 1730s, leading Dissenters such as Philip Doddridge wrote pamphlets enquiring into what they called the ‘decay of the Dissenting interest’. By contrast, Lindsey's own instincts were conformist: he was associated with aristocratic families (as seen in his letters to the Duchess of Somerset) and he accepted aristocratic leadership, such as that of the Countess of Huntingdon and the Duke of Northumberland - from which, of course, he benefited. His career was that of a favoured insider. Through the Huntingdon family he was able to obtain a high-quality academic education at the Leeds Grammar School and at St John's College, Cambridge. To the Duke of Northumberland Lindsey owed his expenses-paid French excursion with the Duke's son, Lord Warkworth, in 1750-51 – at the very height of the Jansenist controversy. For more than 20 years he served as a parish priest – at Kirkby Wiske, Yorkshire; at Puddletown in Dorset, and finally as Vicar of Catterick from 1763 to his resignation 10 years later.

And in 1763 he was offered the position of chaplain to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland – a sure stepping-stone to a bishopric. We would remember that the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1763 was the Duke of Northumberland – whose son married the daughter of George III's favourite, the Earl of Bute, prime minister in 1763. Lindsey's rise in the Church was a classic combination of talent, reinforced by the patronage of the great, and his early letters display a deference towards aristocratic leadership which he never quite abandoned – and also a taste for aristocratic gossip – which he did abandon.

By contrast, ‘personal piety’ signifies an individual relationship with God and the importance of conscience. It invokes those two great principles of the Reformation, the supreme authority of the Bible, and the priesthood of all believers. Personal piety repudiated compulsory subscription to human formularies and asserted the right of the individual conscience to interpret the Bible. It saw no role for the civil authority or the magistrate in the imposition of religious articles of faith; and carried within it the logical conclusion of the ultimate separation of Church and State - a view enhanced during Lindsey's lifetime by the promulgation of the American Constitution in 1787. According to this view, the Church of England was not sufficiently reformed: it still retained elements of popery and superstition, false readings of the Bible, and an excessive degree of clerical authority. Personal piety distrusted clerical, and especially episcopal, power,

and above all it rejected the imposition of uniformity, such as that of the Prayer Book of 1662.

So the distance from Prayer Book to personal piety was indeed a lengthy one – requiring a lengthy journey. And Lindsey announced his completion of that journey with the explicit assertion of religious pluralism which he made in his *Sermon preached at the opening of the Chapel in Essex-House, Essex-Street, in the Strand*, on Sunday, April 17, 1774:

*‘God never designed that Christians should be all of one sentiment, or formed into one great church, but that there should be different sects of Christians, and different churches’.*



*Prof Grayson Ditchfield delivering the UCA’s Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture at Essex Church, Kensington, November 2008. (Photo by Jim Corrigan)*

His citation of Ephesians 4: 3 as his text, ‘Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’, and his advocacy of ‘brotherly affection and friendly correspondence one with another’ amounted to a celebration of ‘differences and varieties’ among Christians.

Given his background, then, Lindsey was an unlikely candidate as the founder of a new denomination or movement. After his secession, he was misleadingly compared to the ejected Puritan clergymen of 1662, and indeed he seemed to like the comparison, with its hint of

martyrdom. But it is in many ways a false parallel. Those former Puritans ejected from their Church of England parishes after the Restoration of Charles II were presented with a sharp ultimatum – to accept episcopal ordination and the Prayer Book by 24 August (St Bartholomew’s Day) of that year, or to be driven from their church livings. But there was no pressure on Lindsey to leave the Church, and not the faintest hint of persecution. In as much as pressure was placed upon him at all, it was pressure to remain in the Church as a parish priest. He could have remained on his own terms, unmolested, varying the Church service as he saw fit, as several of his friends did. What distinguished Lindsey’s case was the issue of conscience, and the belief that his continued conformity was a sin in the eyes of God. Perhaps that should be remembered, when the 18<sup>th</sup> Century is too often, and too easily, written off as an ‘age of corruption’.

How, then, did so unlikely a figure as Lindsey, emerging as he did from the Established Church, come to be the patriarch of the Unitarian movement? How did he become a Dissenter – who emphasised in his will that he was to be buried in Bunhill Fields? What

– in terms of cultural heritage – did he bring with him? For Lindsey, like everyone else, was moulded by his own times. He was not a completely autonomous human being, free from external influences. And I will suggest briefly that three such influences operated very gradually upon Lindsey’s mind, and led him to embark upon his journey.

The first was Cambridge University, where Lindsey excelled, and for eight years (in the early 1750s) was a fellow of his college. That Lindsey was an undergraduate and fellow at Cambridge, rather than Oxford, is of immense significance. The mentality of Oxford, with its legacy of Archbishop Laud, and as the headquarters of Charles I in the Civil War, was Tory, High Church, Royalist, and in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century imbued with more than a whiff of Jacobite sentiment. Cambridge by marked contrast could look back to a Puritan ethos: it had been the university of Oliver Cromwell and John Milton. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Cambridge was Latitudinarian, Low Church, Whig and Hanoverian; it was the university of Sir Robert Walpole and other leading Whigs. Its Chancellor in Lindsey’s time was the leading Whig statesman, the Duke of Newcastle – and Newcastle’s successor as Chancellor of the University in 1769 was the Duke of Grafton, who later became a Unitarian, a member of Lindsey’s Essex Street chapel, and a personal friend. On Lindsey’s 80th birthday in 1803 Grafton sent him what Lindsey’s wife Hannah described in a letter as ‘three bottles of super excellent wine’.

Secondly, at Cambridge Lindsey encountered many clergymen who aspired towards a reformed, more inclusive, Church of England, in which a wide variety of thought, doctrine, liturgical practice and ritual could co-exist. This state of mind was Latitudinarian, and was already coming to be termed ‘liberal’. In practice, a surprising width of opinion could be found within the Established Church. In his 1774 sermon, when he referred approvingly to different sects of Christians, Lindsey was not only referring to the legal existence of Protestant Dissent, outside the Church of England, which had been established since the Toleration Act of 1689, but also to varieties of opinion within the Church itself. And Cambridge was also the University of such Whig, and liberal, clergymen as Edmund Law, Master of Peterhouse, and Francis Blackburne, archdeacon of Cleveland and rector of Richmond, Yorkshire, adjacent to Lindsey’s first parish of Kirkby Wiske – and whose step-daughter Hannah, Lindsey married in 1760.

A fervent admirer of Milton, Blackburne looked back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Commonwealth tradition of resistance to arbitrary authority. He was a particularly powerful critic of the enforcement upon university students and clergymen of subscription to the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England and in 1766 he published a weighty polemic against it, with the title *The Confessional*. Last year, Howard Hague kindly drew my attention to the recent unveiling of a memorial plaque to Blackburne in Richmond parish church: it described him as ‘friend to civil liberty and the equal rights of men in every country’. By the early 1760s, Lindsey, as Blackburne’s son-in-law and neighbour at Catterick, was very much involved with the issue of civil liberty and probably contributed to the book, and to the subsequent controversy.

And thirdly, relatively early in life, Lindsey came to read and sympathise with the published work of one of the leading critics of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity,

Samuel Clarke, the Rector of St James's, Piccadilly, in London, whose publications enjoyed a fashionable readership under the Whig regime. It was from Clarke that Lindsey began, first to doubt, and then to reject, the doctrine of the Trinity, of God as three persons, on the grounds that it simply was not sanctioned by the Bible, but was a later, fraudulent, addition to the authentic Christianity of the Apostles. It was probably the influence of Clarke which led to the rather romantic story recounted by Robert Collyer in an article for *The Christian Life* in 1877. Lindsey, according to the story, 'was reading one day in Paul's Epistles, when these words met his eye: "There is but one God, the Father." They sunk into his heart and haunted him'. From these three sources came Lindsey's first crisis of conscience in the mid-1750s, when, as his agonised letters to the Countess of Huntingdon reveal, he came close to quitting the Church almost 20 years before he actually did. In later life he regretted his decision not to resign at that point, and criticised himself for remaining within the walls of what he called 'Babylon'.

But I am in danger of overlooking one further consideration? In the mid-1750s, Lindsey was still unmarried and his only dependant was an unmarried sister. By 1773-74 he was married but had no children. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, we read many, many, letters from Anglican clergymen to their patrons or bishops anxiously seeking preferment to a more opulent living – and often citing the financial demands of 'a numerous family' in so doing. Had Lindsey and his wife possessed a 'numerous family', would their decision have been any different? That he was childless no doubt made his decision easier, although his colleague and successor as minister of the Essex Street Chapel, John Disney, was not deterred by the needs of his 'numerous family' from resigning his Church benefices in Lincolnshire to join Lindsey in 1782.

But Lindsey would not have taken the dramatic step – going far beyond the position of Francis Blackburne or Samuel Clarke – had it not been for the determined support of his wife. 'Support', indeed, is an understatement. Hannah Lindsey can be regarded without exaggeration as a co-founder of the Essex Street Chapel. In so doing she had to endure the breakdown of her relations with her step-father Blackburne, who bitterly deplored her actions as well as Lindsey's. She kept meticulous financial accounts, wrote letters on Lindsey's behalf as well as on her own account, and left a brief manuscript memoir of his early career (now at Harris Manchester College, Oxford). She sustained him – or, to be more accurate, they sustained each other – during and after his journey from Prayer Book to Personal Piety, from Catterick to Essex Street. The female element in early English Unitarianism is not the main subject of this lecture, but it is a theme which is now being given proper attention by scholars such as Dr Ann Peart and Professor Gina Luria Walker.

I think that in resigning from the Church and setting up a completely independent chapel, Lindsey and his closest associates had two clear ambitions. Firstly, he, and they, sought to reform the Church of England from within. This was an ambitious aim, but one that was consistent with the enlightenment optimism of the age. And Lindsey was not alone in this aspiration. John Wesley had no intention of founding a new denomination, but hoped to use his Methodist movement to revivify the Church and bring it back to what he believed was gospel Christianity. Count Zinzendorf's objective was to evangelise and re-

energise existing Churches in several countries with his notion of the ‘mustard seed’, not to establish a separate Moravian Church in Britain. The Act of Parliament of 1749 that recognized the Moravian Church in Britain and its colonies was in fact a severe blow to Zinzendorf’s hopes. Lindsey, too, did not propose initially to found a separate denomination. Even after the opening of his new chapel, he still believed that the Church could be reformed internally, and that his example would assist this process.

He was confident that the expansion of human knowledge and the progressive victory of truth and rationality would lead to the abandonment of superstition and intolerance; would free the Church’s worship and liturgy from Trinitarian dogma; and confer upon it a more inclusive, and genuinely national, character. But, bearing in mind the effective suspension of the Church of England's Convocation under the Whig government, this object could only be brought about through parliamentary legislation. Hence Lindsey came to understand the importance of petitioning – which was a growing, and increasingly respectable, means of expression of public opinion in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

In 1772, he organised a petition to Parliament for the abolition of compulsory subscription to the thirty-nine Articles. Although that petition was rejected in the House of Commons, Lindsey organised a further unsuccessful petition in May 1774 – a month after the opening service at Essex Street Chapel. One reason for the lack of success was the fear in Parliament and elsewhere of Unitarianism as morally and socially subversive, as well as doctrinally radical. Lindsey’s secession, followed by the publication of his *Apology on resigning the vicarage of Catterick*, was well reported and reviewed, and provoked several very hostile responses. Even then he did not give up. That was why he maintained his close relationship with those like-minded Latitudinarians within the Church who did not resign – clergymen such as Edmund Law, the bishop of Carlisle and the parliamentary reformer Christopher Wyvill, or those who resigned later, like the Cambridge Unitarians John Jebb and William Frend.

Lindsey’s second ambition, I think, involved a determination to risk unpopularity by insisting that Unitarianism belonged firmly within the Christian tradition and was not to be excluded from it as heresy or infidelity. To emphasise the point, he frequently used the expression ‘Unitarian Christian’ – the title of the Association to which I owe the invitation to give this lecture. He, Joseph Priestley, and others sought to provide a rational, and at the same time a biblically based, foundation for their type of Christianity. Indeed, Lindsey repeatedly claimed that Unitarianism was the true Christianity – and that Trinitarianism was a perversion, which had discredited true Christianity in the eyes of rational people. That was one of the reasons, he thought, for the growth of infidelity and atheism in Britain – and, from 1789, in France also. Lindsey's published work, starting with his *Apology*, took the form of detailed scriptural research, involving a search for scriptural sanction to underpin his beliefs and to confute those numerous critics who took the opposite view.

Here his scholarly Cambridge education showed itself: his books were directed towards an elite, not a popular, readership. It is noteworthy that in these controversies he, Priestley, and their opponents took for granted the authenticity of the Bible as the

inspired word of God, the final seat of doctrinal authority, and belonging to a completely different category from that of any other book. Each of them devoted much intellectual energy to attempting to show that the Bible supported them and not their critics.

Hence a particular *bête-noir* of Lindsey and Priestley was the historian Edward Gibbon, the first volumes of whose celebrated and controversial *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* were published in 1776. The anti-clerical, sceptical Gibbon, they thought, in criticising and deriding the early Christians, had attacked this corrupt, debased, version of Christianity and treated it as if it were the pure apostolic religion of the time of Christ. It was a criticism that Lindsey would level against the later work of Thomas Paine. And he argued that only a Unitarian understanding of God would deserve the respect of Jews and Muslims. Lindsey believed that Christianity has become distorted since the time of Constantine, or even earlier, as it had become associated with the civil authorities, which used it for their own purposes.

What, then, was the content of the Christianity which Lindsey wished to espouse and preach? In 1793, when at the age of 70 he resigned his ministry at Essex Street Chapel, he composed a farewell discourse for his congregation. While preparing it, he confided to a friend what its purpose was:

*'I have endeavoured to impress them with a sense of the importance of the principle which distinguishes us from other Christian churches, and of the strict obligations which it lays upon us to holiness of life.'*

In the event, he confessed that the prospect of taking his leave overwhelmed him emotionally and he was unable to deliver this sermon in person. But it was soon published, and in it he reviewed the chapel's history and purpose and set out his own creed. He began by asserting that the chapel's worship was 'directed and confined to the one God and Father of the universe, exclusively of all other persons or beings'. He described the doctrine of the Trinity as 'nothing less than a plurality of Gods', or polytheism. He ridiculed the 'worship as the supreme God, of a man who was crucified in Judea'. The death of Christ, he insisted, was not a vicarious sacrifice for human sin; to argue that it was implied a God 'of stern and rigid justice, inexorable towards those who had violated his holy laws'.

Christ could be regarded as our saviour not because of an atoning sacrifice, but because of his teaching; he should be regarded as 'only the divinely authorized teacher of the will of God, and not God himself'. He urged his congregation not to attend Trinitarian worship, lest they 'encourage such undue sentiments of him'. He concluded on a note of optimism, affirming his conviction that human intellectual improvement would lead to a more rational understanding of Christianity and thus the fulfilment of the will of God: his text was 'Thy kingdom come'. As evidence of this development, he cited the success of the Essex Street Chapel over the previous 20 years:

*'Although it is founded on the principle of the worship of the church established being directed to wrong objects, and such as we cannot on that account conscientiously*

*frequent, there is not perhaps a Christian society, in this great city, for its numbers, more respectable or respected than ours, and such it has been from the very first of its institution.'*

It was a claim strengthened by Lindsey's confidence that the succession to the chapel's ministry was in the safe hands of John Disney (and from 1805 of Thomas Belsham). Thus it would not expire with him but remain an important feature of the religious, as well as the architectural, landscape.

And just as Lindsey looked hopefully to the future of the enterprise which he had launched with such hazard in 1774, he also looked for justification into the past. A central feature of his defence of Unitarianism was a search for legitimacy in the earliest days of the Church, and among the 'heretics' of earlier periods. His heroes included Michael Servetus, martyred in Geneva, and Faustus Socinus, together with more recent examples including John Locke and Samuel Clarke. This was the purpose of his detailed study entitled *An Historical View of the state of the Unitarian Doctrine and Worship, from the Reformation to our own times*, published in 1783. It was also the purpose of Joseph Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, which had appeared a year earlier.

Both interpreted the history of Unitarianism as the working of intellectual and moral improvement in the evolution of Christianity. Both determined to demonstrate that Unitarianism was not merely the preserve of a small and insignificant number of 'heretics'. Instead, its roots lay within the primitive church, it had been the religion of the Apostles, it had been carried forward through the medieval period and could be found, in the eighteenth century, within the Church of England and within Protestant Dissent as well.

Lindsey cited his own chapel as evidence of the growth of what he called 'a spirit of candour' and of 'light and knowledge of just principles'. Hence, while admiring Faustus Socinus, he could present himself as marking an advance over the theology of Socinus, who accepted the idea of worship of Christ, while at the same time denying Christ's divine status. In his 1793 farewell sermon, Lindsey drew an implicit comparison between himself Socinus when he referred to the persecution and exile of the latter's followers:

*'And for almost the whole of the two last centuries, this true church of Christ, has been, as it were, in the wilderness; having no fixed and allowed habitation, no place of rest any where. But it existed in the scriptures, and in the hearts of many truly enlightened Christians in all countries, though legally tolerated in none.'*

'No place of rest' (in this case between Yorkshire and London during the winter of 1773-74) was a comparison taken up by early biographers of Lindsey, notably those of Catharine Cappe and Thomas Belsham.

Lindsey's form of Unitarianism, then, was a vindication of his belief in religion as progressive. Although he had reservations about Priestley's rejection of the Virgin Birth, he identified himself otherwise almost completely with Priestley, his collaborator and

closest friend. His letters offer abundant biographical information about Priestley's career as a theologian and historian. Priestley's enforced emigration to America in March 1794, following the destruction of his chapel, house and laboratory in the Birmingham riots, was one of the worst personal blows which Lindsey ever suffered. The riots even led him to wonder, albeit briefly, whether his optimism as to the spread of reason had really been justified. It also deprived him of the company of the friend with whom he could most easily exchange ideas. Shortly after Priestley's departure, Lindsey wrote in a letter:

*'How much we feel Dr Priestley's separation, in this house, where we commonly were happy in seeing him once or twice a week or oftner, is not to be described, for with all his other powers, he excelled eminently in the private virtues of a friend and chearful, social converse.'*

Even after Priestley established himself in Pennsylvania, Lindsey devoted much time to editing his works for re-publication in London, and several of Priestley's publications of the 1790s carry a preface written by Lindsey.

And the influence of Priestley may be seen, too, in the method of propagating Unitarian doctrines, a method which was to form a distinctive feature of Lindsey's legacy. By the early 1790s, in the reaction against the French Revolution, it was evident that aspirations towards reform of the Church of England were, to say the least, premature. In the midst of what Lindsey regarded as a hostile political and theological climate, he feared that many of his fellow-believers were deterred by timidity to express themselves openly and to attend Unitarian worship.

He responded by defining Unitarian doctrines in a more precise and, it must be added, in a more exclusive manner. He regarded Arians – who accorded Christ a subordinate but, nonetheless, a form of divine status, as less than fully-fledged Unitarians and made no secret of this opinion. In 1794 his explicit summary – 'That there was no God but the Father; and that the worship of Jesus, by Protestants, was equally idolatrous with the worship of his Mother Mary, by the Papists' - went further than before in a narrow, sectarian direction. The word 'idolatrous' was deliberately provocative. It was Lindsey's influence, together with that of John Disney and Thomas Belsham, which led to the use of the term in the preamble to the rules of the Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the practice of Virtue by the Distribution of Books, founded at Essex Street Chapel in 1791. Its wording was unambiguous:

*'While therefore many well-meaning persons are propagating with zeal opinions which the members of this society judge to be unscriptural and idolatrous, they think it their duty to oppose the farther progress of such pernicious errors, and publicly to avow their firm attachment to the doctrines of the UNITY of GOD, of his UNRIVALLED and UNDIVIDED authority and dominion, and that Jesus Christ, the most distinguished of the prophets, is the CREATURE and MESSENGER of God, and not his EQUAL, nor his VICEREGENT, nor CO-PARTNER with him in divine honours, as some have strangely supposed.'*

Lindsey refused to accept amendments to this preamble and, indeed, defended it strongly in his book *Conversations on Christian Idolatry*, published in 1792. For all the depiction of him, by Herbert McLachlan and others, as of a meek and mild disposition, Lindsey's whole temperament was averse to compromise. Even when some members of the Society, such as John Estlin of Bristol, resigned in protest at what they saw as unnecessary divisiveness, Lindsey was unmoved, writing in a private letter 'It was not our view to induce men of very discordant opinions to join us'. He was supported by John Disney, who added that those who perceived Christ 'as being the one self-existing God' were tantamount to 'idolaters in worshipping the creature instead of the creator'.

So by the early 1790s, the type of Unitarian identity which Lindsey espoused was thus doctrinally exclusive, intellectually rarefied and showing every sign of evolving from a rather disparate way of thought into a discrete, organised denomination. Admittedly, this was part of a pattern in the later eighteenth century – and even more in the nineteenth – whereby denominationalism in general was becoming more pronounced. John Wesley's followers left, or were driven from, the Church of England to form the Methodist denomination; and the fissures between Rational and Evangelical Dissent became deeper and harder to bridge.

But nonetheless, Lindsey at the end of his life was vulnerable to the charge of inconsistency – that despite his opposition to the principle of compulsory subscription and the imposition of human formularies of faith – he and his closest associates had come to lay down a dogmatic formulation of their own. He would undoubtedly have responded by pointing out that the Unitarian Society was a purely voluntary society and fully entitled to draw up its own criteria for membership; no one was compelled to join. It could not be compared to the Church of England, which, its privileged status as the state Church, could use secular authority to insist upon conformity to its creeds.

Lindsey's contribution to Unitarian identity perhaps most obviously took an institutional form. Essex Street Chapel was the first openly, avowedly, Unitarian place of worship in Britain. There was nothing clandestine about its inauguration and its purpose was publicly advertised. Although the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century laws against the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity were very rarely invoked, they were not repealed until 1813, and the possibility, however remote, of a legal challenge to Lindsey's chapel remained until that year. It is difficult now to appreciate the extent of the continued elite and popular revulsion against non-Trinitarianism in this period. None of this, however, deterred Lindsey from using his metropolitan base to stimulate the growth of provincial Unitarianism.

His methods included modest financial subsidies, the distribution of books, and the fortification of the morale of young Dissenting ministers whose congregations had abandoned the Calvinism of their predecessors, such as those at Shrewsbury and Portsmouth. The foundation of new chapels, such as that at Plymouth Dock, and the re-foundation of others, such as that at Dundee, was in large part the result of Lindsey's stimulus. The institutional legacy also took the form of promotional societies: the Unitarian Society of 1791 was the direct, linear ancestor of the Unitarian Fund, the

Association for the Protection of the Civil Rights of Unitarians in 1818, and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1825. Lindsey understood the importance both of lay support and of institutional continuity.

And we have seen that by the age of 50, in 1773, Lindsey could not simply jettison his entire past and his intellectual upbringing. It was no coincidence that he also brought to Unitarianism a liturgical tradition, in the form of a revised – and, of course, non-Trinitarian – Book of Common Prayer. He believed that liturgical worship, as well as the *extempore* prayer familiar to the older dissenting denominations, was another important means of ensuring continuity. From Samuel Clarke, too, that Lindsey learned that the Anglican liturgy could be adapted and reformed – and constantly improved. His version of the Book of Common Prayer went through four editions in his lifetime and was used as far afield as the first Unitarian chapel in Boston, Massachusetts, under its remarkable minister, James Freeman.

Lindsey's final contribution to Unitarian identity, I would suggest, lay its alignment with political as well as with theological radicalism. It was an alignment implicit in the rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin – a radical idea indeed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Lindsey retained a fundamental optimism about human nature, a belief in the strong possibility of human improvement towards perfection, not the inevitability of human depravity. By improvement he meant material and constitutional reformation, as well as the individual conversion experience which was so important to evangelicals. He supported moves for parliamentary reform, applauded the American Revolution and helped to campaign for the repeal of the Test Act which debarred non-Anglicans from holding public office. And he drew enormous – almost millenarian – hope from the early stages of the French Revolution. For Paine's *Rights of Man* he expressed great admiration:

*'Mr Paine's second Volume ... indeed in time must promote no small change in the minds of men, and in time on all the governments on the earth, where such plain striking truths will ... be dispersed and adopted.'*

He only turned against Paine in 1794-5, when the latter used his book *The Age of Reason* to attack the Christian revelation. Lindsey's radicalism was one reason why he carefully maintained his contacts and friendships with those Latitudinarian clergymen like Christopher Wyvill, who did not secede, but were prominent in reform movements. And although never himself at any serious risk of prosecution, the evidence of his letters shows that Lindsey during the 1790s came to regard Unitarians as a persecuted minority, the potential victims of a corrupt and reactionary regime; such a mentality led easily into a commitment to political change. He expressed vehement opposition to the war against revolutionary France and argued for the freedom of the French people to determine their own destiny. Probably, however, he would not have extended his approval to Napoleon: Hannah Lindsey probably articulated her view as well as his when she wrote about the French Emperor in 1804: 'He has done by his threats, what never can be undone, changed the manners and views of this Country from Commerce merely, to a Military cast.'

We know that Lindsey's type of Unitarian identity, though continued into the 1820s by the generation of Thomas Belsham, was 'overtaken' by Romanticism, by mysticism and by the 'higher criticism' of the Bible. It was repudiated by James Martineau, who objected to the application of the term Unitarian to a denomination or church, as distinct from its being owned by an individual. But without that identity largely created by Lindsey, and the organisational basis on which it was founded, there would have been no denomination or movement for Martineau to criticise or to change. It was natural, it was to be expected, and it was desirable that the Unitarian tradition after the time of Lindsey should mutate, respond to rapidly changing circumstances and evolve in the light of developments in theological thinking and in society.

And so Lindsey must be understood as belonging firmly to his own day and place; it would be entirely unhistorical to apply 21<sup>st</sup> Century criteria to his thought and actions. And it is easy to create myths. Lindsey was not a martyr; he was not impelled to leave the Church by anything other than his own conscience and his commitment to personal piety; and he did not experience the extremes of poverty. But we should not lose sight either of his courage, his originality, and his consistency. He stood out among his contemporaries. And the Unitarian movement and many outside it remain very much in his debt to this day.

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## The generosity of a wounded heart

In a recent sermon, **David Morgan** reflects on the gifts that the reclusive 19<sup>th</sup> Century American poet Emily Dickinson brought to the world.

About 20 years ago, I had recently completed an English Literature A-Level, and was beginning an English degree, when I learnt one day that Ted Hughes, who was then Poet Laureate, had edited two volumes of verse – one was *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, the other *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*. Who on earth was this 'Emily Dickinson', I wondered? It looked as if our Poet Laureate considered her to be on a par with Shakespeare, or at least equally worthy of his editorial attention. Could this be true? I began to feel slightly anxious – there I was, a precocious and slightly cocky young student, and I reckoned I knew a thing or two about literature, and yet I had never heard the name of Emily Dickinson! I resolved to put the matter right as soon as I could.

Of course, in those days, before the internet, it wasn't as easy as it is now to indulge one's idle curiosity about this or that; but fortunately, my local library did have a copy of Ted Hughes' *Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*, from which I was able not only to get the flavour of her poetry – a flavour which turned out to be a bit of an acquired taste, as

some of you may have found already! – but also, no less importantly, to learn something about the woman herself. Briefly, I learnt that my hunch, that her name had a rather 19<sup>th</sup>-Century and American ring to it, was perfectly sound. She actually lived from 1830 to 1886, in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts; it appears that she rarely, if ever, left the town, and indeed, for much of her life, rarely left the family house. Her existence seems to have been sufficiently noted by her neighbours for her to have gained the epithet of ‘the nun of Amherst’, an enigmatic, reclusive white-clad figure occasionally glimpsed at a window. As you’ll infer, her life had a rather desolate quality to it which she never overcame; and yet I hope to show you that she managed to turn her very lack of fulfilment into an extraordinary source of creativity.

In addition to being renowned for her skill at baking bread, it was known that she wrote poetry, and indeed a tiny handful of her poems were published in her lifetime. However, when you consider that her *Complete Poems* come to a volume containing one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five items, you will realise that her endeavours in this field were very severely under-recognised! Incidentally, this scholarly edition of Dickinson’s poems only appeared as late as 1955. Thus Dickinson seems almost to belong more to the canon of 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature than to that of the 19<sup>th</sup>, an impression which is borne out by the modernity of her concerns as well as by her highly idiosyncratic verse style.

I’ve said that Dickinson was referred to as ‘the nun of Amherst’, but in any literal sense taking holy orders was not an option for her, growing up as she did in a Puritanical Protestant milieu, among the spiritual heirs of Calvin and John Knox, a tradition which had dissolved the monasteries in England three centuries earlier, before itself being driven into exile in the New World. Here was a religion which laid great emphasis on being ‘saved’, of undergoing a ‘conversion experience’ whereby the individual would publicly testify to having been ‘born again’, to having received the Holy Spirit and repudiated one’s sins.

This was quite a separate matter from baptism or confirmation – after all, this religion was deeply suspicious of what it called ‘outward’ ceremonies or sacraments; rather, this was something that was expected of the adult believer, at an age when one was credited with the maturity that would supposedly guarantee that the experience and the testimony were genuine. It was expected of Emily Dickinson in 1850, at the age of twenty-one; and it was a fence at which she fell. It would of course be a cheap caricature to use ‘Puritan’ as a dirty word, and to dismiss the religion of Bunyan or Milton as a gloomy, joyless thing which offered no scope for the creative imagination; but even so, this was not a framework in which the young Emily Dickinson could feel happy or at home. In the book *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus*, William Hamilton quotes from one of Dickinson’s letters to a friend, dating from 1852. She said:

*‘Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie [her sister, Lavinia] believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless.’*

This statement, valuable though it may be, is more a matter of ‘what’ than of ‘why’. William Hamilton notes that, in rejecting the severe Calvinism of her family background, Dickinson did not turn instead to what he calls ‘the sentimental piety of [Harriet Beecher]

Stowe, or the more serious anti-Puritan worlds of Unitarianism and transcendentalism' – so, I'm afraid *we* can't lay claim to her in that respect! It must surely strike all of us here, in particular, as sad that she was obliged to deny herself the companionship of a nurturing community of fellow-seekers after truth; but at that time and place, no such community was available to someone who wanted, as she did, a Christianity that would be a matter of struggle and paradox, rather than of ready-made labels and cheap comfort. Nothing less could offer sustenance to such a formidably questing intelligence, as we realise when we come to read the poems. In a book with the engaging title of *Catching Life by the Throat: How to Read Poetry and Why*, Josephine Hart has this to say:

*'Emily Dickinson wrote short. Short does not mean sweet. Short does not mean easy. Just in case you think you can wing it with the nun of Amherst, let me quote [Professor] Harold Bloom: 'One's mind had better be at its rare best' when reading Dickinson. Approach her with humility and full attention – she has a mind like a laser beam and she can seriously damage your complacency.'*

It was not for nothing, indeed, that the Romanian Jewish poet Paul Celan, having survived the Holocaust, took an interest in Dickinson's work, translating some of the poems into German. In her maverick approach to both poetry and theology, and her use of the one as a vehicle for the other, she bears comparison with William Blake, another prophet largely without honour in his own generation. Dickinson's attitude to religion, as expressed in her poems, has always been the thing I've found most striking and original about her work. I'd like to discuss a few of the poems which have made a particular impression on me in this respect.

I've made the comparison between Dickinson and Blake, who died three years before she was born, and whose work she is unlikely to have known; yet one imagines she would very much have sympathised with the sentiments expressed in some lines from Blake's 'The Everlasting Gospel', where the poet tells his interlocutor, 'The Vision of Christ that thou dost see / Is my Vision's chiefest enemy'. For Dickinson, too, the deep ambivalence in her recorded statements about Jesus Christ – sometimes denouncing him as a bully and a fraud, sometimes moved by the pathos of his sufferings – seems to resolve into a conviction that there is a great gap between the Jesus preached by the Church and the one we meet in the Gospels, very reminiscent of the distinction drawn by a later generation of theologians and biblical critics between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith'. Consider these lines from 1862, which clearly indicate Dickinson's exasperation at the promise of Jesus, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you':

*At least – to pray – is left – is left –*

*Oh Jesus – in the Air –*

*I know not which thy chamber is –*

*I'm knocking – everywhere –*

*Thou settest Earthquake in the South –*

*And Maelstrom in the Sea –*

*Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth –*

*Hast thou no Arm for Me?*

(no.502, pp.243-4 in *Complete Poems*)

Two years later, the cry of frustration has turned into an attempt at dramatic dialogue, this time responding to the invitation, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’:

*“Unto Me?” I do not know you –*

*Where may be your House?*

*“I am Jesus – Late of Judea –*

*Now – of Paradise” –*

*Wagons – have you – to convey me?*

*This is far from Thence –*

*“Arms of Mine – sufficient Phaeton –*

*Trust Omnipotence” –*

*I am spotted – “I am Pardon” –*

*I am small – “The Least*

*Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest –*

*Occupy my House” –*

(no.964, p.451 in *Complete Poems*)

Does Dickinson take up Jesus’s invitation to ‘occupy his house’, or does she not? We’re not told; perhaps the writing of this poem was itself part of the process of making her mind up. George Herbert concluded his poem ‘Love Bade Me Welcome’ by telling us that ‘I did sit and eat’; but it seems Dickinson would sooner remain hungry than be filled at the cost of compromising her integrity.

Dickinson told her mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson that her father had forbidden her, as a child, to read any book but the Bible. She developed a furtive love of books nevertheless; as for the Bible, she took her revenge on it in this poem, thought to date from as late as 1882:

*The Bible is an antique Volume –*

*Written by faded Men*

*At the suggestion of Holy Spectres –*



*Black-and- white daguerrotype (or early photograph) of Emily Dickinson, taken around 1847. It is the only authenticated portrait of the poet later than childhood.*

*Subjects – Bethlehem –*

*Eden – the ancient Homestead –*

*Satan – the Brigadier –*

*Judas – the Great Defaulter –*

*David – the Troubadour –*

*Sin – a distinguished Precipice*

*Others must resist –*

*Boys that “believe” are very lonesome –*

*Other Boys are “lost” –*

*Had but the Tale a warbling Teller –*

*All the Boys would come –*

*Orpheus’ Sermon captivated –*

*It did not condemn –* (no.1545, p.644 in *Complete Poems*)

The fifty-two-year-old Dickinson has clearly lost any fear she may ever have had regarding committing ‘the sin against the Holy Ghost’, with her jokey reference to ‘Holy Spectres’ – notice the casual heresy of the plural! – ‘Holy Spectres’ having inspired the ‘faded Men’ who were responsible for this ‘antique Volume’. We know from the outset that any attempt to summarise the contents of the Bible within the confines of a short lyric poem is bound to be rather facetious, and so we are not too surprised to be told that Satan is ‘a Brigadier’ (perhaps a reference to his curious status as one of the ‘sons of God’ in the Book of Job), or that King David, the putative author of the Psalms, is a ‘Troubadour’. Dickinson goes on to compare the Bible to Classical mythology, very much to the detriment of the former. ‘Orpheus’ Sermon captivated – / It did not condemn’: perhaps the Bible too would be more popular with ‘the Boys’ – and indeed with a latter-day Eurydice, like Dickinson herself – if it, or its preachers, relied more upon charm and delight, and less upon threats and intimidation.

I’d like to conclude by returning to Ted Hughes’ book *A Choice of Emily Dickinson’s Verse*, and to a remark he made in the Introduction. I haven’t re-read it while preparing this sermon, as my point is that it’s stuck in my mind ever since I first read it, some 20 years ago. As I remember it, what Hughes said about Dickinson was this: ‘The great tragedy of her life came when she realised her exceptional endowment of love was not going to be asked for’. I found this very haunting – first, the thought that there are indeed people in this world who have an ‘exceptional endowment of love’, that is, a stronger-than-usual impulse to *give* love, as if this were their chief *raison d’être*; and then to think what a tragedy it would be if such a person, of all people, found that her love was not

required, that it was disdained as a cheap and tawdry thing. The starting-point for Ted Hughes making this claim on behalf of Emily Dickinson was apparently an enigmatic lyric poem, of unknown date but first published in 1896, which runs:

*My life closed twice before its close –*

*It yet remains to see*

*If Immortality unveil*

*A third event to me*

*So huge, so hopeless to conceive*

*As these that twice befell.*

*Parting is all we know of heaven,*

*And all we need of hell.* (no.1732, pp.702-3 in *Complete Poems*)

Those last two lines sound almost like a calendar motto at first – ‘Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell’ – but think what they imply. They equate heaven with hell, the two great polar opposites of Western thought throughout the Christian era, by saying that the only thing we know for sure is that they both involve separation, and therefore loss. When I first read this poem, the reference to two cataclysmic events having happened (we don’t know what), and a third one being yet to come, put me in mind of Sylvia Plath (who I’m sure had read Dickinson) and her poem ‘Lady Lazarus’, where she seems to say much the same thing about herself. One can only wonder if the same tragic irony occurred to Ted Hughes when making his selection of Dickinson’s verse some five years after his wife’s suicide. As for me, in 1991, I was moved to write a poem of my own, in the style of Emily Dickinson, responding to this one in particular and borrowing the first line from it. I’d like to offer it here as I draw to a close, not for its poetic merits but in the hope that something edifying may be drawn from it:

### **Reading Emily Dickinson**

*“My life closed twice before its close” –*

How like Sylvia Plath!

But what discoveries were those

That turned her to a wraith?

We only know about them what

They made her certain of:

The worst sin – after loving not –

Is, not accepting love.

No one could wish for the deep sadness, the social isolation or the spiritual confusion that blighted Emily Dickinson's life. But if we were to suffer these things, how many of us would channel our losses and sorrows into such a phenomenal outpouring of creativity? We may not share Dickinson's talent for artistic creation, and it may be that her own poetry leaves us cold; yet we must surely still see in it her great gesture of generosity towards a world that had given her so little.

With the help of one another in this community of ours, may we all ask ourselves what acts of unconditional giving are possible for us, with the strengths *and* the weaknesses that we have. May we draw inspiration from Emily Dickinson's resolution not to make do with cheap or easy answers. And – still more important – may we all consider how we too can take the failures and disappointments of our lives, and in spite of – maybe *because* of? – these, still create something precious and beautiful. Amen.

**David Morgan is a member of the UCA and of Golders Green Unitarians, where he serves on its management committee.**



## Finding unity beyond dogma

In an address to the Islamic Society at Cambridge University, **Chris Wilson** examines the basic tenets of liberalism in Christianity.

I should open my talk with a caveat, a health-warning, as it were. I claim no special expertise in this area. My comments are simply those of a Multi-Faith Chaplain and Unitarian and Free Christian Minister. They are, however, informed by 14 years teaching experience in Further Education, and more than 25 years of trade union activism, where social justice has been – and is – an abiding concern. They are also informed by my own faith tradition. I aim to limit my comments – in the main – to the Christian tradition; and in this regard will examine seven themes:

### **Liberalism in Christianity**

The first point that should be made is that liberalism in Christianity is not a fixed position, but rather more a mind-set, rooted in values rather than doctrine. Nor is it a political viewpoint; liberal Christians may be Liberal in their politics, but they could just as easily be Conservative or – as in my case, Democratic Socialist.

## **Theological liberalism does not necessarily require political liberalism.**

The liberal Christian would affirm *some* of the following points, while Unitarians would affirm all of them:

1. That the Bible is our '*foundation document*'; defining the Christian community.
2. That revelation is not sealed, but rather is on-going.
3. That authority lies neither in scripture nor in tradition, but in conscience.
4. That creedal statements represent no more than provisional ideas.
5. That Reason and Faith are complementary, rather than in opposition.
6. That God calls us into loving relationships, into community, one with another.
7. That *orthopraxy* (right-action); is more important than *orthodoxy* (right-thinking).

I'd like to say a bit about each of these points.

### **The Bible as our foundation document:**

This is central. Without a sense of being rooted in and through the identity of a scripture community, cohesion is lost. I am Christian because I respond to the narrative of human religious awakening as expressed in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. I am a Christian because the life, example and ministry of Jesus (of *Yeshua*), calls to me in way which continually surprises and challenges. But the Bible should not be read dogmatically. It needs to be read contextually, intelligently, its contradictions recognised; inspired by God, it may be, but it was written by men who were products of their time and place. Two conclusions arise from this:

- That exclusivist; '*we're right – you're wrong!*' interpretations of scripture should be eschewed.
- That Biblical meaning is not fixed, but changes through time, as reason and experience illuminates.

There are lessons here for Christian fundamentalists, and perhaps also for those of other faiths who favor exclusivist interpretations?

### **Revelation is not sealed**

The idea that God has only spoken in and through the Bible has always struck me as rather odd. There is arrogance in fundamentalism, which presumes to second-guess the Divine. Surely, we all need a little more modesty, and a little less certainty! The liberal Christian is one who wants to listen more for God, and say less about God. The liberal Christian is one who rejects the view that God can be packaged, and codified, like some soap-powder. Again, consequences follow from this understanding:

- That God may speak in and through other faith traditions, as well as our own.

- That God may still speak in ways which challenge us, and our prejudices.
- That multi-faith dialogue may be a way to encounter different understandings of the Divine.

### **Authority in conscience**

A good Unitarian one this, that goes back to our leading thinker of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, James Martineau, and in a sense this connects with the last point. It is that God speaks in and through individual conscience, the voice within, that '*still small voice*' heard by Elijah those centuries ago – and heard still. If organised religion says, and it sometime does, do something wrong, then conscience may still be that *real* voice of God within. I'll use one simple example here. Christian Church condemnation of same-sex relationships jars against that voice of conscience which says that God is Love. Might it just be that the real issue is promiscuity and not sexuality? Might it just be that God rejects hate crimes, and does not seek to justify them in and through historic texts taken out of time and place?

### **The problems with creeds**

I come from a non-creedal Church, not, by the way, the only one. Opposition to creeds within Christian Churches is shared by the Quakers, the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians and the Moravian Church as well as by Unitarians and even some Baptists.

Creeds cause division. They can only ever represent partial understanding. The Nicene Creed causes difficulty not just for liberal Christians, but also for multi-faith dialogue. I affirm the Divine Unity. God as One, with Jesus as his pre-eminent Son. This opens up opportunities for conversation with others – but we should not underestimate the difficulties here either. There is also a broader lesson that words can imprison, when in fact we should all be open to a God who still speaks still, not just once, in history.

### **Reason and Faith**

These two qualities, for the liberal Christian, are complementary. As reason and intellect are themselves God-given, so we should respect the insights of the scientist, and avoid – in the Christian case – Biblical literalism. Scripture can be understood, metaphorically, contextually, and *personally*; chiming with your own experience through the stories of God speaking and acting long ago. We must not allow those of a dogmatic viewpoint to counterpose Reason and Faith.

As Science illuminates, as it maps the stars, understands the elements, so should we respect its insights and be prepared to change our views – confident always in the knowledge that mystery will remain at the heart of the human condition, and that faith will always be our map to guide this experience.

## Loving Community



*The Revd Chris Wilson (centre of back row, with clerical collar) pictured with the Multi-Faith Chaplains at Cambridge Regional College after a recent regular meeting. (Photo by Jim Corrigan)*

As a Christian, and as a Minister, I believe my own calling to preach the *Kingdom of God*, not as a millennial event but as something realised in and through loving acts, the loving community; *realised eschatology*; as the theologians would have it. This means the imperative, to reach out to others, to love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself; in particular when your neighbour seems different. Liberal Christianity affirms *all* to be children of God, those of all faiths, of all creeds, of all traditions, and classes – and yes, of all sexualities.

Again, I cannot understand why Churches, why faiths, appear sometimes so obsessed with sex and sexuality;

when the real issue has to be personal commitment and promiscuity. Why do we so often seem to miss this point? When people use others that is wrong, but that has nothing to do with sex and sexuality – the time of prejudice must stop. We need to celebrate our God-given differences not enforce a crude and ultimately wicked uniformity. God is found, I am convinced, in and through loving communities, and those who are liberal Christians, indeed all Christians, should always seek to follow *the Great Commandment* of Jesus, to love God and neighbour as self.

## Orthopraxy not orthodoxy

Finally, we need to focus more on how we live and act, not upon the creeds or doctrines we confess. We show our faith by our *actions* more than our words. *Orthopraxy* (right-living) is more important than *orthodoxy* (right-thinking). That is the liberal Christian way, and I also genuinely believe that it is the way of Jesus, whose example shines before us all, calling us to follow.

Friends, these then are the parameters of liberal Christianity. Perhaps they may also resonate with liberalism in Islam, but that is for you to decide, and for me to listen. In the meantime, I'll leave you with words of a Unitarian pioneer, Francis David, who established in 1568, the first ever Act of Religious Toleration in Transylvania, in Europe, through the Edict of Torda. In his words: *'We need not all think alike to love alike'*.

**The Revd Christopher Wilson is Multi-Faith Chaplain at Cambridge Regional College and Minister at Great Yarmouth. He is Chaplain to the UCA.**



# Patterns of the past restored

**Michael Holmes** relates how Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross, created a lasting monument for its tercentenary.

At Hyde Chapel in Gee Cross, Cheshire, the congregation were proud to celebrate 300 years of worship last year. As their organist, I was asked to attend several meetings to discuss the celebrations. There were many suggestions for events and special services. However I felt that something of a lasting nature should be created. The building is a fine structure, the second on the site dating from 1848 and intended as a showpiece. Looking round the chapel, I had an idea which I discussed with the Chairman of Trustees, the Revd Andrew Parker, who agreed it was worth pursuing. This ambitious scheme was for the restoration of the decorative organ case situated at the back of chapel -- and of the case pipes, which originally bore a coloured stencilled pattern, but which had been painted over in 1987.



*The intricate beauty of the patterning can be seen on these restored organ pipes at Hyde Chapel.*

The plan created interest, with the usual questions about cost and feasibility – could anyone do this kind of work these days? Enquiries were made and quotes received. While quotes were coming in, the organ-builders (Jardines of Old Trafford) found a photograph taken as a record just before they painted over the original stencilled pipes with gold paint. This was fortunate as no other photographs had been found, but this caused the quotes to go up as there was more detail than expected! Fundraising continued and when the fund was nearly complete, the firm of Lambert Walker of Bamber Bridge, Preston, was asked to take on the work at an estimate of around £15,500.

The case is part of the original design of the 1848 building by architects Bowman and Crowther of Manchester. The case was a gift from Miss Ashton of Flowery Field (Hyde) and cost £130. It is in oak, and it features carved heads and angels playing instruments. There is a riot of Gothic detail. As part of the original architectural scheme, there were matching features on the pulpit at the opposite end of the building. As the organ case and pipes are in the base of the tower at the rear of the building, the visual impact is impressive.

When the new Chapel was being planned the fashionable London organ-building firm of Hill were approached, but the cost was too great. Instead the organ from the old chapel was transferred to the new one. This instrument dated from 1822 and was by Bradbury of Manchester. This organ was placed behind the new case, the decorated pipes providing the lower half of an Open Diapason stop.

In time, Hills were approached again and in 1869 a new organ was ordered for £550. This was installed behind the case which then became purely decorative as the (old) pipes were no longer used.

The organ was rebuilt and enlarged in 1939 by Conacher of Huddersfield, and refurbished again in 1987 by Jardine Church Organs. At that time, as the case was looking shabby with the pipes very faded and flaking after 140 years, it was decided to paint them over with gold paint. Moving on to 2006, the quick fix of gold paint had oxidised and now looked tatty. Also the lighting system had been improved, making a once gloomy building quite bright which again highlighted the poor appearance of the organ case.

At the beginning of October 2008, the contractors began work and took the case pipes away back to their works. They carefully stripped them with non-caustic stripper and grade 0000 steel wool (used to polish glass in industry). The pipes had been very well prepared before over-painting and had been partly sanded in places where the paint had been loose. Most of the colours had disappeared but as the pipes were of a high lead content, the original lead paint had etched the designs into the base coat, leaving a negative image, the stencil design showing up a lighter colour.

### **Identifying the colours**

With this information and the photograph, the scheme was redrawn on computer. The designs were sent to another company who cut new stencils to re-do the scheme, and the photograph was used to identify the colours to use.

The re-stencilling was painstaking work . Some pipes have six layers of stencilling. Only a small area can be done at once, then it must be left to dry. It is all done by hand, carefully matching the layers up one by one. While this work was going on, the woodwork was also being restored. Missing pieces were re-carved after measurements and photographs had been taken and clay moulds made. The decoration was glued on (it had probably originally been assembled off-site), and with age, some pieces had fallen off and been lost.

In January 2009, scaffolding was erected and the woodwork cleaned with 'Archdeacon's Mixture' which rejuvenated the case's original oil finish. At this point the (almost) finished pipes were replaced along with the carved sections. And this was in time for a celebratory organ concert on 17<sup>th</sup> January featuring Lincolnshire organist Michael Baron. This was a success with over 100 people attending.



*The organ pipes and casing restored to their former glory in Hyde Chapel.*

There were still small bits of stencilling to be done, and these were completed on site over the next fortnight. The result is a re-creation of the original 1848 scheme as seen when the building was new – and that end of the building is now greatly improved.

Many thanks to all who contributed to the Appeal including the East Cheshire Union, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, Cheshire Mark Masons and the Chapel Trustees. We hope the case will be a lasting memorial of Hyde Chapel's Tercentenary and an encouragement to anyone contemplating restoration work in one of our historic chapels. The craftsmen are still to be found and it is achievable – even today.

**Michael Holmes is organist at Hyde Chapel, Gee Cross, in Cheshire.**



# FORTHCOMING EVENTS 2009

***Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July: UCA Synod***

Graig Unitarian Chapel in Llandsysul, Ceredigion, Wales.

***22<sup>nd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> October: Conference of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), European and Middle Eastern Region, and the European Liberal Protestants Network*** in Mannheim and Ludwigshafen (near Heidelberg in Germany).

***Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> October: UCA Synod and Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture***

Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.



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