

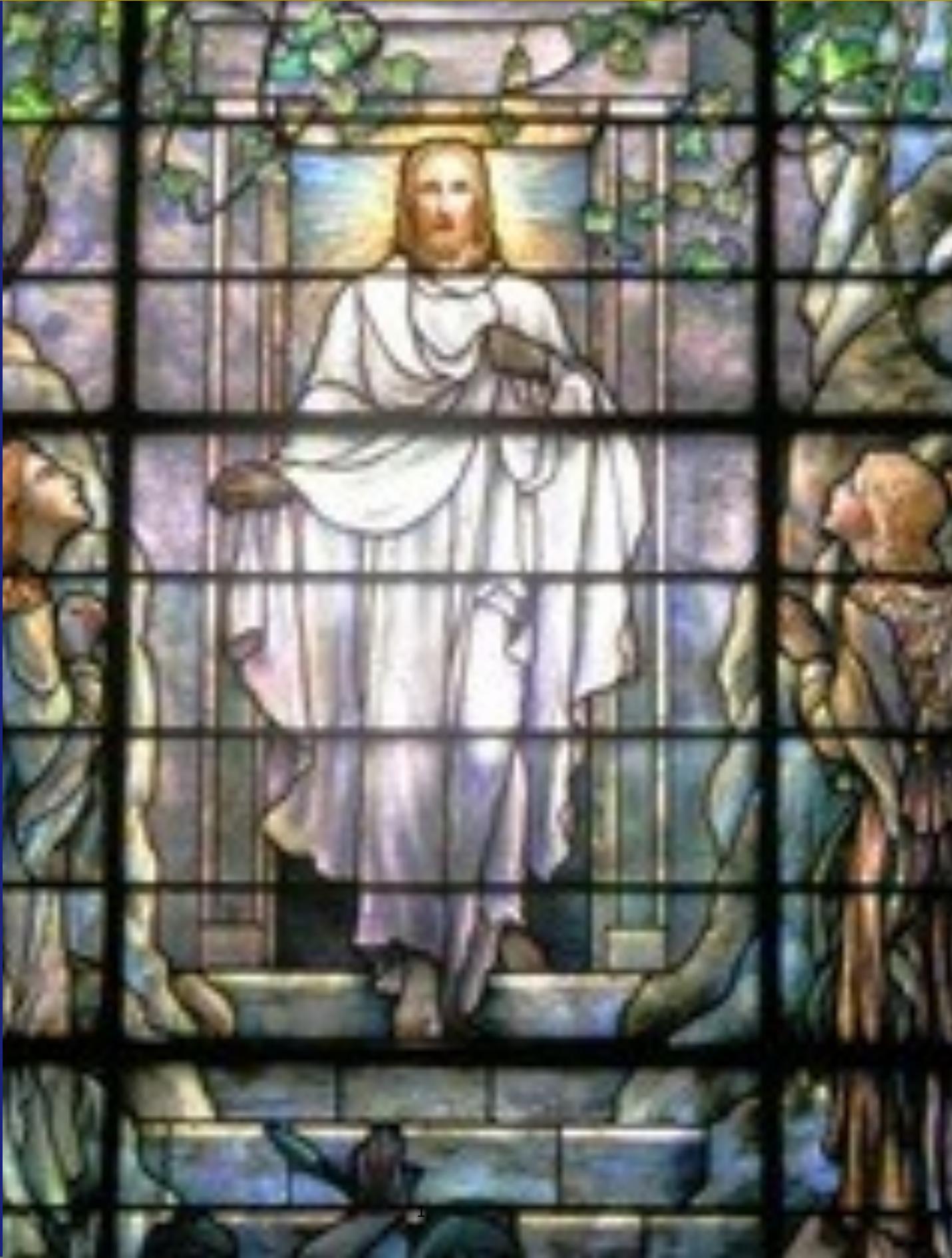
The Liberal Christian Herald

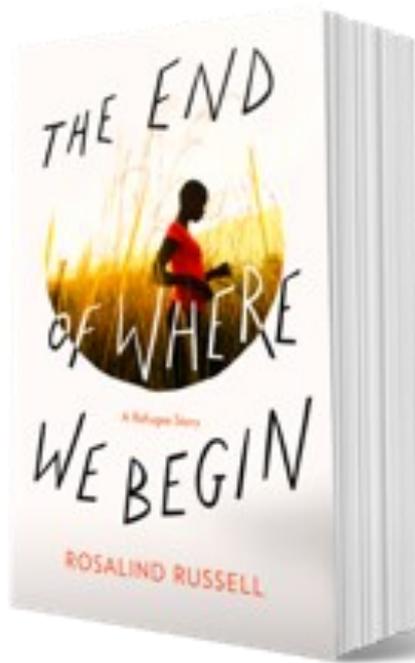


The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.

Easter Edition

Issue 101 March 2021





An example of a Milaya bedsheet.

See Article page 12

The Liberal Christian Herald

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Front Cover Image from Pinterest depicting the Resurrection Window, Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia

Editorial

Jeff Gould



It is usually unwise to speak in superlatives, but I do think that it would be safe to say that the relevance of the Easter festival to our lives will be more potent this year than ever before. With a Government schedule to the lifting of restrictions and the anticipation of enjoying greater freedoms in our day-to-day lives, the sense of emerging from a 'tomb' with new life before us is very real. The Christian faith was born in a cradle of loss, death and abandonment. The story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, which can be understood and interpreted on many different levels, offers hope for anyone who

has survived a prolonged period of deprivation and incarceration. It had been my own hope that congregational hymn singing would be allowed by Easter Sunday, but that now seems to be an unrealistic aspiration. What is allowed is communal worship, which will never be taken for granted in our country again. Even Whit Sunday/Pentecost is a full month before the expected lifting of most restrictions on 21 June 2021. One can only wonder what a variety of expressions will be offered to celebrate the long-awaited return to 'normal' life! Perhaps sharing refreshments after a Sunday service will be the ritu-

al return to all that we have missed over the course of the past year since Covid-19 entered our lives. The value of community has been highlighted in this shared time of isolation, and the Church is, at its best, a community that lives the Easter faith.

The UCA has offered itself as a resource to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches for thirty years. It was founded in an effort to preserve and strengthen the liberal Christian witness within our movement and continues to perform that role whilst honouring the denomination's object, 'to uphold the liberal Christian tradition'. That particular vocation has often brought it into conflict with other leading voices and representative groups in British Unitarianism and Free Christianity. If we do profess to be Christians, then the gifts of the Spirit that Paul offers in the letter to Galatians, chapter five, verses 22 to 23 are to be present in our disagreements. Those 'fruits' are identified as being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Whilst Christians have no monopoly on such virtues, they are called to manifest them in all speech and actions. We mark this 30th anniversary year of the UCA with humility and with gratitude for the work of its members since its foundation.

Where did the church go wrong?

Brian Hick

Dr Brian Hick, a previous Editor of LCH, has been doubly locked down this year, because in addition to Covid19, he has had on-going treatment for T-cell lymphoma. It has given him an unexpected opportunity to reflect on his recent reading and concerns about the response of the church under lock-down.

In 1975 I took a party of students from a Boys Secondary School to Rome at Easter. Few if any of them had any connection with any church and were taken aback not only with the magnificence of the buildings but also with the experience of a papal audience where we actually got mentioned by name! We were staying in a hotel out at Ostia and in the evenings the one television in the bar was showing Robert Powell's *Jesus of Nazareth* dubbed into Italian – not that that mattered as the story line was fairly obvious.

Just before Christmas 2020 Robert Powell returned to Israel to search for *The Real Jesus of Nazareth* and drew together both believers and liberal academics to give very differing interpretations. Of these I was delighted to find Prof Bart D Ehrman. Over the last few years I have read many of his books and find he makes a very strong case for the reinterpretation of scripture and the need to take very careful consideration of the context within which the various documents which make up the New Testament were written. He writes within the liberal stream which started with Bonhoeffer and includes John Robinson, David Jenkins, Don Cupitt, Greta Vosper, up to contemporary writers like Brian Mountford of Oxford. The thing they have in common is not so much an abandonment of the idea of God but a desire to try to make sense of

what Jesus was doing and teaching for three years before the final, climactic events which led to his trial and death. As someone pointed out to me not long ago, the most important part of the creed is the comma between *born of the Virgin Mary* and *Suffered under Pontius Pilate* which appears to cover everything Jesus did, taught or intended. It is as if the three years spent in and around Galilee were of no consequence, compared with the last week. There is a tendency to skip from the nativity to the crucifixion as if there is nothing in between. Sadly for many Christians this is the reality of their faith. Ehrman and others trace the way they think this came about.

Jesus gathered together a group of people – more than just the twelve – who worked closely with him in and around Galilee. The numbers presumably fluctuated over time, but essentially there was a core of both men and women working for the vision of the Kingdom which Jesus was promoting. The key to that vision, it has always seemed to me, is in Matthew 25 and this active involvement with the immediate community seems implicit in everything Jesus and his followers are doing for those three years in the north. During this time Jesus sends his followers out to bring the good news to people. What is that good news? It certainly isn't based on salvation as a result of Jesus' death and resurrec-

tion. It is certainly not based on hope for a future based on belief in Jesus in any way other than what he is teaching. It certainly does not require anyone to sign up to a set of dogma or rules. It does however take us back to Matthew 25 and all the examples Jesus himself gives of what 'repentance' – turning to face the other way – is all about. They do this for three years and were obviously successful enough to gather a large following, albeit among the great unwashed – the ignored, the outcasts, the unimportant.

Then Jesus comes to Jerusalem for the last time. It is obviously not the first time, as a good Jew, that he had been to Jerusalem but this time was different if only because he had a much stronger following and reputation - but a following and reputation for what? Ask the person on the top of the Clapham omnibus today about Jesus and they are almost certain to go from nativity to crucifixion as if there were nothing in between. The reason of course is the way the church from a very early stage, managed to move away from Jesus' social / moral / ethical teaching and to hang everything not on living the life of the Kingdom but on belief – belief first and foremost in the resurrection and then, within a relatively short space of time, with all the doctrine that went along with it.

How did this happen? Bart D Ehrman is one of a number of writers who make a distinction between the early followers of *The Way* and the later believers who were introduced to Christianity in a world removed from Galilee and even from Israel.

If the early followers were sent out to preach the ethics of a kingdom which will support and love all people, this was not true of the Greco-Roman followers at the eastern end of the Mediterranean who Paul had drawn into the faith. Jewish believers would have had great difficulty believing Jesus was God if only because it was so against everything the Hebrew Scriptures stood for. But for the Greco-Roman world off-spring of deities were common and a part of the day-to-day theology which surrounded them. The idea of a demi-god born of a virgin was not a problem. Rising from the dead was not a problem. Moreover, a religion which set strict rules and regulations for its followers was after all so much simpler to follow than one where you were asked to think for yourself and work out what a follower of Jesus would do in any particular case – even though Jesus seems to take every case on its

own merits.

I find myself strongly drawn to Bart D Ehrman's way of reasoning, but the most recent book I have been reading, entitled *The Godless Gospel* by Julian Baghini, encapsulates even better not only where I think I am at present but also where the church consistently drifted away from Jesus' main intention. How did this happen? My understanding is as follows – though I fully accept this is a very personal view and will be anathema (if not heresy!) to the main body of the church.

Jesus drew together a following in and around Galilee who were focussed on his teaching of the need to change the world by changing their personal approach to the world. This did not step outside Judaism but rather reformed it to make it far more egalitarian. Nothing he does is against the Law or the scriptures. This does not mean to say he did not cause trouble. Hierarchies do not like egalitarian thinkers, even less so those who actually want to make a difference.

He travels to Jerusalem where the hierarchy find ways to have him executed. He is dead and buried. What happens next is unclear and clouded in retelling from many years after the event. My thinking is that there are strong hints in the gospels that those with him in Jerusalem went back to Galilee. Two of the writers mention that the disciples should go back to Galilee to meet with Jesus again, and John's gospel places Peter's wonderful meeting with Jesus having breakfast on the sea shore.

What do the heartbroken disciples find when they get back to Galilee? A community, the one they left only a week or two before, still wedded to Jesus' ideas of turning the world upside-down. They can go on spreading, teaching, enthusing Jesus' message as if he was still with them – as if he was still alive. It is not difficult to see how this could rapidly over time become a belief that he is still actually alive even if not present.

So far so good. The majority of these early followers would have spoken Aramaic, with only just enough Greek to keep out of trouble with the Roman army. They certainly did not use Greek on a regular basis and it is certain few if any would have been able to read or write. Jesus could read – he does so in the synagogue – but there is no indication he could write and he certainly left nothing in writing. The written, Greek, documents which make up the New

Testament come from at least twenty years later and from a very different part of the world. Paul's missionary work is entirely conducted within the Greco-Roman urban environment and his preaching relies almost entirely on belief in salvation and resurrection. His letters hardly mention any of Jesus' teaching or preaching prior to his death. Paul's ethical and moral teaching is didactic compared with Jesus' far more fluid approach. Paul is concerned with running small church communities, which rapidly grow into larger hierarchical groups which seem a world away from the egalitarian life being preached in Galilee.

And where are we today? Look at virtually any church considered to be part of the mainstream and it is based entirely on a Pauline model. We may not expel or punish people for heresy, but the concept still lurks close to the surface. Possibly only the Quakers come close to the Galilean model where living the life of the Spirit is far more important than what you believe.

It could of course be equally true of the Unitarian Church. It has always saddened me that the founders of Unitarianism considered themselves Christian and I suspect would have had little difficulty with what I have said above. But following Jesus has become compartmentalised to the point where doubt can only come after acceptance of creedal statements and a willingness to refuse to go against the monumental authority of the traditions and hierarchy of the church as a whole.

In the meantime, the poor are unclothed, hungry, imprisoned for no good reason, and ignored, simply for being poor. And where is the church in all of this? I ask because the last year has given me time to think and it has not been a pleasant experience. Jesus' teaching about our responsibilities seems quite clear to me. We have had a year of the pandemic, but where is the church? Oh I know that individual Christians are doing excellent work by themselves, but where is the church not just speaking out for the poor but acting on behalf of the poor? Dare one say by giving away vast amounts of the money it currently has to meet real need? Jesus' story of the man who squirrels away his cash only to die suddenly surely sets the example. The church should be acting now to meet need – not keeping it in funds when it hopes the interest rates will return to normal next year - and as for complaints about sacking choirs?!

I am drawn finally to a comment by Meister Eckhart which is along the lines of *If you are on your way to church and remember anyone who is hungry, go and feed them first – only then will you have time for church.*

Julian Baggini	The Godless Gospel	Granta 2020
Brian Mountford	Christian Atheism	Winchester 2010
Bart D Ehrman	The Triumph of Christianity	One World 2018
Bart D Ehrman	Jesus before the Gospels	Harper One 2016
Bart D Ehrman	God's Problem	Harper One 2009
Bart D Ehrman	Lost Christianities	OUP 2003
Bart D Ehrman	Lost Scriptures	OUP 2003



The Author in Rome (from his own collection).

Reimagining Easter

Stephanie Bisby

As a child I was puzzled by Easter. I didn't grow up in a religious household, so my experiences of the Easter story were acquired somewhat piecemeal and second hand. In the patchwork assembled by my small child's mind, Easter involved bunnies which, in defiance of both biology and logic, produced not baby bunnies, but eggs, and chocolate ones at that. There were hot cross buns, and I think I gleaned a sketchy idea that these commemorated Jesus on the cross, but there was not, so far as I recall, much hint of a resurrection. Mostly, Easter rituals involved making lacy baskets for Cadbury creme eggs out of old boxes and pipe cleaners, chicks out of woolly pompoms, and maybe the occasional lacy bonnet. My childhood version of Easter got a lot of things wrong, I think now, but it got one thing right. Easter is not supposed to be logical.

During my brief flirtation with the Church of England while at University, I became quite preoccupied with how much or little of the Easter story might be considered factual. Was there a historical Jesus? Did he die on a cross? And if he did, how did he then walk around, talk to his disciples and allow them to probe his wounded hands? One thing I knew was that if I'd been around at that time, I'd have been a Thomas, a doubter, needing physical proof before I trusted the evidence of my own eyes. In the absence of that proof, I couldn't imagine basing my whole approach to life on the story.

I argued fiercely with my friends in the Christian Union, who insisted that Christianity was the right path and the resurrection was a fact... because the Bible told them so. Their circular logic failed to convince me, yet so did the equally vehement insistence of my rational atheist friends that the story was irrelevant, since it was clearly scientifically impossible. I wasn't there to see, ran my internal logic, so how could I be certain Jesus *didn't* rise from the tomb, any more than I could be certain he did? Like Bertrand Russell, I felt compelled "to describe myself as an Agnostic, because I do not think that there is a conclusive argument by which one can prove that there is not a God."

I'd like to say that it was Unitarianism which provided me a way out of this knotty puzzle, but it wasn't,

at least to begin with. It was fiction. Reading *The Hero's Journey*, a book by Hollywood scriptwriter Christopher Vogler, inspired in its turn by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I began to see echoes of the shape of the Easter story, not just expertly woven into C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories, but also in Star Wars, Star Trek, Spiderman, Superman and of course Harry Potter. We don't need to believe these stories are true in order to take inspiration from them and apply their wisdom to our lives. When facing a difficult decision, I might close my eyes and murmur, "Use the force, Luke," as a reminder of the power of intuition, even though I wouldn't write 'Jedi' on my census form. And it turned out that, in a similar way, I could benefit from the power of the story of the risen Christ without – if you'll pardon the pun – taking it as gospel.

The wonderful Barbara Brown Taylor, whose book *The Preaching Life* was one of the recommended course texts for Unitarian College, quotes theologian James Whitehead: "Faith is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way." She tells us "Everyone is born with imagination. Small children are virtuosi, perhaps because their fresh minds are not yet hedged by the constraints of reality." She continues: "All I know is that there is always more than meets the eye and that if I want to see truly I must also be willing to look beyond the appearance of things into the depth of things, into the layers of meaning with which the least blade of grass is endowed."

Jef Jones' workshop on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* at FUSE (the Festival of Unitarianism in the South East) left me dazzled by the number of layers of meaning in a blade of grass – from a handkerchief dropped by a coquettish deity to the hair growing on a grave – and beneath all the other meanings is the assertion of life that is at the heart of the Easter story: "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death." Something as small as a blade of grass serves as a symbol of the power that underlies all creation, Dylan Thomas' "force that through the green fuse drives the flower." This connection between the Easter story and rebirth provides fertile ground for hymn-writers, from John MacLeod Campbell Crum in *Now the Green Blade Riseth* to

Alicia Carpenter in *A Promise Through the Ages Rings*.

The essay on 'Imagination' in *The Preaching Life* ends with "the question God continues to ask us: What is real to us, what is *true*, and what do we intend to do about it?" When we inhabit the imaginative world of Easter, we can move beyond questions of literal or historical truth, and instead apply the shape of the story to our own lives. Easter is in our ability to imagine that an empty tomb might be the result of resurrection not robbers, that the figure encountered in the early morning light might be either gardener or ghost, that we might once again sit and talk with those we have loved. Easter tells us no matter how dark the night, morning will follow, and no matter how cold the winter, spring will come. If along the way we also imagine rabbits laying chocolate eggs, well, that's all part of the fun of Easter, a time when the impossible briefly comes to life and walks beside us on a dusty road.

Review of Dancing with Mortality

Reflections of a Lapsed Atheist by Bert Clough

Francis Elliot-Wright

It's always welcome when humanists engage with religious ideas rather than attack them, so Christians will enjoy Bert Clough's *Dancing with Mortality: Reflections of a Lapsed Atheist*.

Each chapter is based on a Sermon, and this format makes it especially readable. He takes on big questions with a clear, light approach, bringing in an impressive range of religious thinkers, as well as quoting current Unitarian ministers. This gives a real flavour of what it is to be plugged into a living tradition that is also in dialogue with past religious thinkers.

From Nietzsche to Simone Weil, from Gandhi to Albert Schweitzer, we hear from some true greats. And it's their life stories as much as their ideas that infuse the conversation. The chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a particularly good example.

It will please many readers that John Shelby Spong is a big influence, yet Spong called himself a Christian, and Bert describes himself as a religious humanist. To Bert's credit, he is upfront about what this means, saying: '*A supernatural, theistic God was thus created to be a human coping device, and the human system named religion empowered the ruling figures of both king and priest. It is based on a supernatural, yet essentially materialistic view of an afterlife.*' This is his '*religious humanism*', by which he means '*Religious Thinking centred on God being in our own hands not in the hands of a supernatural Being.*'

I'm not convinced by the claim that this represents a '*third way*' between '*creedal religions*' and atheism. It's great when humanists take religion serious-

ly, but it seems, especially in the first four chapters, that Bert engages with religious ideas *and* attacks them. Christians may wonder how 'religious' this religious humanism really is. Is religion *just* a set of human behaviours and attitudes? Does it not also need a reference point in something genuinely transcendent?

At times the author is as dogmatic as the Christian ideas he gives short shrift to, and occasionally I felt he was arguing with straw men. Happily this is not typical of the whole book. The fifteen chapters are based on sermons that will have been some time apart, and one gets the pleasing sense of the author's attitude shifting somewhat as he considers different questions on different occasions.

I can imagine some lively tea and chat after Bert's services, as one of the book's strengths is the way it introduces the reader to a discussion, often circling the question from different vantage points, rather than forcing an answer. Such discussions will be further enriched by the list of works that have been referred to at the end of each chapter.

Readers should keep in mind that these are the thoughts of a humanist, albeit one well-disposed to religion as a source of secular wisdom. That notwithstanding, this is an enjoyable and thought-provoking read. It would make an excellent introduction to Unitarianism for friends or family, and a profitable read for those of us already inside the tent.

Dancing with Mortality: Reflections of a lapsed Atheist (112pp) £10 (including postage). For a copy email b.clough947gmail.com

Honest is the best policy

Ken Howard

In this digital age, research into any subject we may be interested in, inevitably leads to internet websites. There is no doubt that Sir Timothy Berners-Lee's creation is a wonderful tool. What we never know, of course, is if the websites we visit are telling us the truth. Many websites are glossy, colourful and attractive; sadly, many are missing vital information. Many websites are also used as a simple marketing ploy, designed to draw people in by not telling the whole story.

The new GA website is, we are told, designed to attract new and young visitors who may be attracted to the denomination. It seems that the GA is not afraid to stoop incredibly low to achieve this. Is the GA saying that only newcomers and young people are important? Are existing Unitarians expected to sit quietly by and do as we are told? What happened to the equality that we claim to be famous for?

The website is misleading, deceitful and downright underhand. The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches is a religious denomination. Unless the constitution is rewritten this is a fact that cannot be disputed. I wonder why this is not mentioned on the homepage. Why is the GA afraid to put the full name of the denomination and its objects in a prominent place? The only answer can be that it is a deliberate attempt to deceive.

A first glance at the website will make you think you are reading about a radical, left wing and woke political pressure group, rather than a religious organisation.

What has led us to this situation? For some time now a small group of influential people within the GA have been seeking to rewrite and ignore our history and traditions. They are trying to change at least part of the denomination into a "non-religious" movement (whatever that is). A one size fits all organisation is impossible to achieve. We are supposed to be promoting a religious denomination, not selling paper clips!

Perhaps now is a good time to remind everybody about the objects of The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches:

*"To promote a free and inquiring **religion** through the **worship of God** and the celebration of life;*

*the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and **the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.***

To this end, the Assembly may:

*Encourage and unite in fellowship bodies which uphold the **religious liberty** of their members, unconstrained by the imposition of creeds;*

*Affirm the **liberal religious heritage** and learn from the spiritual, cultural and intellectual insights of all humanity;*

Act where necessary as the successor to the B&FUA and National Conference of Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-Subscribing or Kindred Congregations, being faithful to the spirit of their work and principles. Providing always that this shall in no way limit the complete doctrinal freedom of the constituent churches and members of the Assembly;

Do all other such lawful things as are incidental to the attainment of the above Object."

If we are to be a credible religious denomination, surely, the first thing the website must be is honest. We should not lead people up the garden path by only telling them part of the story.

There are about 150 Unitarian and Free Christian congregations in the United Kingdom, yet the website seems to pick out only a handful of them for a special mention. Either all congregations should get a mention or none.

The Free Christian wing of the denomination hardly gets a mention, it is almost as if it never existed. The Free Christian hymn book, "Hymns of Faith and Freedom" is conspicuous by its complete absence from the site. More importantly it appears that we should not complain, we seem to be expected to go quietly. The undermining of the traditional forms of Unitarianism and Free Christianity has been going on for some time now. Some people regard people like me who value our traditional Unitarian and Free Christian forms of worship as outdated, old fashioned and out of touch. The GA lauds congregations that are not Unitarian, not Free Christian, and not even a hybrid, and allows them to use the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian churches as a flag of convenience. This new website reinforces that stance. A Unitarian Minister once stated openly on a social media platform that it would not matter if a few Free Christian congregations were to leave the GA. It is nice to feel wanted!

There is no doubt that we are a broad church and quite rightly so. However, this must mean that eve-

ry congregation is equal. Most importantly all congregations must surely be expected to adhere to the objects of the GA. We must not allow the denomination to become a “free-for-all”, we must retain some common sense.

The new “Chalice” looks more like a Menorah than a Chalice. I am old enough to remember the adoption (in the UK) of “The Flaming Chalice” as our simple, yet effective symbol. Since then, it has “Morphed” more times than Tony Hart’s plasticine man. When will it ever end? The Chalice is supposed to be “open” with an identifiable flame. This new Chalice looks just like a company logo, it has no meaning.

Within the movement and on the new website, there seems to be a blurring of the spiritual versus the religious. I can get a spiritual experience watching Stalybridge Celtic play football. I can assure you that watching Stalybridge Celtic is far from a religious experience! There is a big difference between a spiritual experience and a religious one, and the two should not be confused.

So, what can be done to maintain the denomination as a cohesive organisation?

I am aware that this article will upset some people. I will be identified as someone who objects to change, I will be a dinosaur, I will be accused of stirring up trouble. This always happens to people who complain, the complainers become painted as the guilty party. It is the oldest trick in the book. I am

aware that change is part of life. Every congregation I know (and I know a lot) have evolved and changed as they have matured. Congregations have changed methods of worship and have embraced new technology to enhance and improve their worship. What most congregations have not done is to change the underlying ethos of their congregational identity. As often happens people who are determined to introduce radical changes simply do not know when to stop, they are prepared to throw out the baby with the bath water, and we arrive at a situation similar to the one in which we now find ourselves. I think The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian churches must decide once and for all whether we are a religious denomination or not. If we are, then surely it must be expected that all congregations adhere to the objects of the Assembly. If we decide we are not a religious denomination, then that will inevitably lead to the exodus of some congregations. Some congregations will look for other denominations to align to, but some will become totally independent Unitarian and Free Christian churches. It will undermine our current structures and will lead to major problems with the Charity Commission.

Whatever happens next, above all else, we must be totally honest about what and who we are, and what we stand for. Our presence on the internet would be a good place to start.

Charity Commitment update

Cathy Fozard

Just a reminder as to how we are supporting our designated charity MaaChild during the pandemic. Last year the officers decided as it would be impossible to fundraise, we would use all the donations we received towards achieving our commitment of raising £1500 for the charity. At the end of 2020 we were able to send £860 to MaaChild. This meant that we would still need to fund raise another £640. It was proposed that we use a very generous donation of £500 from a member at the beginning of January and supplement it from our funds by £140 to make up the total. The officer group agreed and the balance of £640 was transferred to MaaChild. We have achieved our target of £1500 because of the generosity of our members!

At the AGM it was decided to continue to support MaaChild until the end of 2021 in the hope that we can do some fundraising later in the year.

Therese Green, founder of MaaChild joined us at the AGM and gave a very interesting presentation about the work of the charity with Maasai people in south Kenya. Please see Therese’s letter to the UCA on the inside back cover.

Martin Camroux: Keeping alive the rumour of God when most people are looking the other way

Ant Howe

Camroux draws on his 40 year ministry experience within the United Reformed Church. His experience parallels that of Ministers in many denominations: facing declining numbers and teetering church institutions. Writing from a liberal Christian perspective Camroux honestly faces the issue that churches are no longer the first point of call for those interested in spirituality and states that the church 'answered questions which many people no longer feel they need to ask'.

But when you take belief in God out of a society which has previously been built around that belief, what happens? Do things fall apart? And why are fundamentalist churches the only ones which still seem to grow and thrive? Speaking of the decline of liberal Christian churches Camroux wryly quotes Charlie Brown: "I don't understand it. How can we lose when we're so sincere?!"

Camroux explores non-theistic faith and the rise of groups such as Sunday Assembly, but whilst he admits there may be some overlap of beliefs, he concludes that he is still a theist even though he freely states that 'all ideas of God are open to change. Life changes them, new ideas change them.' Journeying through Tillich, Nietzsche, Kant, Schleiermacher and others the author invites us to consider that 'spirituality is real' and that keeping an appetite for wonder can help motivate life.

Whilst writing from a Christian perspective, Camroux does challenge us: 'If the best picture we have of God is a crucified Galilean carpenter we have some rethinking to do' and introduces the thought that 'beauty is God's handwriting' – citing Emerson as he does so – yet the author returns to the God we find revealed in scripture and plainly states that if his own faith were not biblical and Christ-centred then 'I would have nothing valuable to share'. Arguing against fundamentalism Camroux cautions us that scripture must be read 'sympathetically, critically and contextually' and reminds us that applying critical thinking to the Bible is one of the great gifts which liberal theology has offered.

The centre of the book invites us to engage with the question: Would it matter if we knew nothing of Je-

sus? Camroux argues that, whilst there is much we do not know about the historical Jesus, this need not preclude us from reaching some conclusions both about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Camroux goes as far to assert that 'The Jesus story is our greatest narrative of divinity, the source of our richest inspiration.'

Moving through chapters discussing justice and social theology we then reach a chapter entitled Crucified where the author considers the subject of penal substitution and atonement theory, concluding 'The idea of a God who, to satisfy his own idea of justice, tortures his son and then, at the moment of his greatest need, turns away from him depicts a God whom I do not recognise'. Yet the chapter concludes with the idea that Calvary is where we see God's presence most clearly.

Like many liberal Christians, Camroux is not convinced by a physical resurrection, yet can still proclaim Christ is Risen! He speaks of the love of Jesus 'not contained in any tomb'.

The book ends with the argument that 'The church will forever bring out a hunger in us that cannot be discovered by any other means' and that liberal Christianity still has much to offer. Growth may seem but a dream at present but the book ends with the thought that "The moments of wonder are real, the experience of transcendence is real, and the prophetic passion is real. The spiritual is there for us to rediscover."

The book is an extremely accessible read: a personal journey though belief accompanied by some of the great theologians and thinkers. It has much to say to a denomination such as ours which is in numerical decline. There are no practical solutions offered, but a call to re-examine what makes the church unique. I'd recommend it as Easter reading for Unitarian Christians. ISBN: 978-1-7252-6241-6

Ant Howe is Ministry Tutor with Unitarian College, Biblical Studies Tutor for the Worship Studies Course, and a member of the UCA

A Unitarian Christian reporting from Uganda

Jeff Gould

Sometimes, the work of Christian Aid and other international aid agencies can seem all too remote from our day-to-day lives in a developed country of the Northern Hemisphere. There is the danger of de-personalising the very people we want to help improve their circumstances and the very real possibility that it will be an unequal relationship, with us as the providers, and the recipients of our concern become turned into passive and voiceless statistics, without names, without histories and without dignity.

A member of the congregation I serve in Hale Barns, Cheshire, Rosalind Russell, has written a book that seeks to address those tendencies by providing an insight into the current crisis in the young nation of South Sudan. I had the privilege of officiating at Ros' wedding at Norcliffe Chapel in Styal, Cheshire, and was also delighted to baptise her two girls. I have watched the progress of her career with admiration and amazement. Ros is a journalist with two decades of international experience, having worked as a foreign correspondent for Reuters and *The Independent*. Her reporting included the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq and Myanmar's Saffron Revolution. She is one well-travelled lady!

Her latest book, *'The End of Where We Begin'*, documents the lives of three refugees from South Sudan's civil war, whose real life stories challenge many assumptions and stereo-types that are often held about people who are forced to flee their homes and live in challenging conditions. The book ends in a place where all three principal characters of the book find themselves. At the time of writing, the Bidi Bidi refugee camp in Uganda was the biggest of its kind in the world. In spite of the appalling barriers to maintaining good health and achieving some positive sense of community, the three persons featured not only move forward in their own lives, but contribute significantly to their fellow-refugees who live alongside them.

Some of the proceeds from the sale of the book will be directed to a non-profit organisation that works

with a women's collective in the Bidi Bidi settlement. The Milaya Project takes its inspiration from the handmade bed sheets (the *milayas*) that have been made in South Sudan and Sudan for generations. They are typically decorated with swirls of flowers, trees and animals of the local environment. Before the civil war, these *milayas* were used for dowries and as gifts for special celebrations, but now, after years of violence, they have been used to carry a household's few possessions when families had to leave their homes at night. They would often have to walk for days or weeks, transporting all that they owned in these beautifully-crafted sheets.

The Milaya Project connects South Sudanese refugees with customers all over the world who want to support this traditional art form and help the women who make them to forge a new life in their host country, until such time as they are able to return home to South Sudan.

The End of Where We Begin, by Rosalind Russell, Impress Books, 2020, ISBN 13:978—1-911293-55-2, www.impress-books.co.uk

If you are moved to make a donation to The Milaya Project, here are the details of its website:

www.milayaproject.org

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Obituary Dr Roger Paget Booth 1934-2020

Philip Booth



Roger Booth was born in Wallasey, Cheshire on 15 October 1934 and was brought up in Keighley, Yorkshire after his family moved there in 1938. Roger attended boarding school from the age of 8 and won a scholarship to Rossall School in Fleetwood, Lancashire, where he excelled at his academic studies and was a keen cricketer.

At the age of 16, Roger enrolled on a law degree at Leeds University where he achieved first class honours, which was a remarkable feat in view of the fact that he was working as an articled clerk at a law firm in Keighley concurrently. After qualifying as a solicitor in 1956, Roger completed 2 years of National Service in Aldershot, Surrey. He then returned back up north to Keighley where he became a partner in the firm where he had served his Articles.

Seeking a new challenge, at the age of 36 Roger moved with his young family down to Surrey and he worked as an in-house lawyer in London for a number of years. After redundancy following the takeover of his then employer, Roger worked from home as a sole legal practitioner but also commenced his theological academic studies. His motivation for this change in direction was that as a lawyer he believed he might be able to contribute towards the

elucidation of what was authentic in the Gospels by applying the legal rules of evidence to the Gospel statements. By plotting the development of Jewish law he hoped to see whether the state of law depicted in the Gospels coincided with its state in the time of Jesus, for example in relation to handwashing and work on the Sabbath.

Along with his private legal practice at home and contributing to St Andrews Church in Kingswood, Surrey as a lay-reader, Roger commenced a theology degree at King's College, London. After successfully completing his undergraduate studies, Roger accepted a post as a senior law lecturer at Buckingham University whilst embarking on a theology Ph.D at King's College.

Roger's Ph.D thesis focussed on Mark Chapter 7, 1-23 and it was published by Sheffield University Press as 'Jesus and the Laws of Purity' in 1986. He published through his own Paget Press his next two books – 'Contrasts – Gospel Evidence and Christian Beliefs' in 1990 and 'The Bedrock Gospel – sifting the Sources' in 2001. In the latter book Roger examined the Gospel sources and decided which words and acts of Jesus were authentic and which were the work of the early Christians. In his final book 'Down to Earth – Thoughts of a Free Christian'

published by Austin Macauley in 2019, Roger sought to assist potential followers of Jesus who might be sceptical about the supernatural elements, such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. The relationship of Free Christianity to Unitarianism and other divisions within the Christian Church and to Islam was also explored.

Roger's Gospel studies convinced him that Jesus had revealed God to us but was not God himself. This was supported in his view by the fact that Jesus frequently in the Gospel treats his Father as a separate person from himself. Therefore, Jesus states that only the Father is good and that only the Father knows when his kingdom will come.

Following his retirement from full-time work, Roger moved down to the South West and he served for nine years as Minister (Lay Pastor) at Bridport Unitarian and Free Christian Church. He also contributed a number of articles to the Liberal Christian Herald in recent years.

Roger died on 5 December 2020. He is survived by his wife Lisa, his three sons Adam, Alistair and Philip, and six grandchildren.

Societies Day

The UCA will participate in the General Assembly
Societies Day

via Zoom on Thursday 17 June 2021
from 11.30am to 12.30pm.

Your participation in this event would be welcomed.
Please contact Jean Bradley for more information .

Email: chattyministerjean@gmail.com

Phone: 01565 754465



Registered charity 1152932
***Providing sustainable secondary educational support
for Maasai students in Southern Kenya***

17th March 2021

Dear Cathy and all UCA members

I am writing on behalf of everyone at MaaChild to express our deepest thanks for your willingness to help towards our mission and by pledging to support MaaChild for the rest of this year. This means a great deal to us and more so for all the children we support.

It was good to meet all of you on Saturday and thank you for your patience as I find zoom talks a challenge and would always prefer seeing you in person!

Small gestures, which seem like tiny droplets when originating here in the green hills of Lancashire, create ripples which become mighty waves of opportunity when they reach the plains of Southern Kenya.

On behalf of all the children we support and our Maasai representatives, thank you once again for all your kindness and your continuing support for our work. We very much value your participation and look forward to working with you again in the future. Please let me know if there is anything further, I can do for you.

With sincere thanks,

Therese and the MaaChild Team

Phone 07917010933

Email info@maachild.com

www.maachild.com



Christ in Gethsemane by Heinrich Hofmann 1886