

THE HERALD

JOURNAL OF THE UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION—NO. 72

AUTUMN 2011 & WINTER 2012



**Transylvanians face up to the
future ... p6**

Special focus: Learning from others

Editor: Jim Corrigan

80 Holly Park Road, London N11 3HB

Email: jim@corrigan.myzen.co.uk Tel: 020 8361 1843

Website: www.unitarianchristian.org.uk

CONTENTS

Editorial: Learning from others	p2
Moderator's Letter: Project Sierra Leone	p4
Transylvanian Unitarians keep faith – Jim Corrigan	p6
Inclusive church in Belfast – Jim Corrigan	p11
Who are the UU Christians? – Tom Wintle	p14
What's holding us back? – Victoria Weinstein	p17
Charter for Compassion – Feargus O'Connor	p21
Who is Jesus? – Tim Powell	p25
Book Review: <i>Christian Voices in UU</i>	p30
Forthcoming Event	p31

Cover Photo: *Before Sunday worship at Second Unitarian Church, Marosvasarhely, Transylvania.* (Photo: Jim Corrigan).

Editorial: Learning from others

The theme of this Autumn/Winter *Herald* is indeed 'learning from others'. I was fortunate to visit two allied denominations earlier this year: Hungarian Unitarians in Hungary and Transylvania, and All Souls Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland – accounts of both trips appear in this edition. Our Hungarian co-religionists have remained deeply faithful to the Unitarian Christianity they inherited from the Reformation, but they face tough challenges today. How are they coping? And All Souls in Belfast is creating an inclusive church, socially and theologically, with organ-led Unitarian hymns on the one hand, and hymns led by a youthful Jesus Praise Band with guitars on the other. Are these two strands containable in one church?

Then there is the United States, where Unitarian Universalist (UU) Christians are living through exciting times. The Rev Tom Wintle outlines four main types of UU Christianity: Classical, Catholic, Liberation and Questioning. It is sobering to realise that almost all Unitarian Christians and Free Christians in Britain would fit comfortably into the first category, Classical, described as 'a low-keyed Christianity that focuses on the human life and ethical teachings of Jesus'. Not for most of us the wilder shores of Catholic Christianity!

Even more sobering is the wide-ranging critique of Unitarian Universalism offered by another UU minister, the Rev Victoria Weinstein. She is keen to cut down *hubris* – pointing out that there are more Muslims in the Boston area of the United States alone than there are Unitarians in the entire world. Perhaps her most challenging insight is that,

CONTENTS

Editorial: Learning from others	p2
Moderator's Letter: Project Sierra Leone	p4
Transylvanian Unitarians keep faith – Jim Corrigan	p6
Inclusive church in Belfast – Jim Corrigan	p11
Who are the UU Christians? – Tom Wintle	p14
What's holding us back? – Victoria Weinstein	p17
Charter for Compassion – Feargus O'Connor	p21
Who is Jesus? – Tim Powell	p25
Book Review: <i>Christian Voices in UU</i>	p30
Forthcoming Event	p31

Cover Photo: *Before Sunday worship at Second Unitarian Church, Marosvasarhely, Transylvania.* (Photo: Jim Corrigan).

Editorial: Learning from others

The theme of this Autumn/Winter *Herald* is indeed 'learning from others'. I was fortunate to visit two allied denominations earlier this year: Hungarian Unitarians in Hungary and Transylvania, and All Souls Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland – accounts of both trips appear in this edition. Our Hungarian co-religionists have remained deeply faithful to the Unitarian Christianity they inherited from the Reformation, but they face tough challenges today. How are they coping? And All Souls in Belfast is creating an inclusive church, socially and theologically, with organ-led Unitarian hymns on the one hand, and hymns led by a youthful Jesus Praise Band with guitars on the other. Are these two strands containable in one church?

Then there is the United States, where Unitarian Universalist (UU) Christians are living through exciting times. The Rev Tom Wintle outlines four main types of UU Christianity: Classical, Catholic, Liberation and Questioning. It is sobering to realise that almost all Unitarian Christians and Free Christians in Britain would fit comfortably into the first category, Classical, described as 'a low-keyed Christianity that focuses on the human life and ethical teachings of Jesus'. Not for most of us the wilder shores of Catholic Christianity!

Even more sobering is the wide-ranging critique of Unitarian Universalism offered by another UU minister, the Rev Victoria Weinstein. She is keen to cut down *hubris* – pointing out that there are more Muslims in the Boston area of the United States alone than there are Unitarians in the entire world. Perhaps her most challenging insight is that,

whatever her denomination calls itself, it remains a (small, left-wing) mainline Protestant church that differs from other mainline Protestant churches in that it openly expresses doubts about God, welcomes atheist viewpoints and has eclectic worship. Otherwise, it looks pretty much like other mainline Protestant churches.

Then there is a review of a book on Christian voices within UU. Some of these Christians express beliefs in a Divine Jesus and in the Trinity, and a lot else besides. It's an invigorating read, intellectually and emotionally, whatever one's feelings about the viewpoints.

But is all this too contradictory, with Unitarian and Unitarian-linked churches in three different places (Transylvania, Northern Ireland and the United States) taking radically-different theological positions? The answer to this point was well-supplied by the President of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, the Rev Brian Kiely, in a lecture at our Annual Meetings in Britain (in Nottingham) in 2010. He said: *'Unitarianism is not really a global faith. Rather it is a collection of indigenous expressions of the liberal religious spirit.'*

Gaining a realistic view of who we are can only help us. Let us remember our strengths in Britain too: Unitarians and Free Christians take a lead in the fight for equality, we play a key role in promoting social justice, we enjoy a free faith unencumbered by creeds, and we have the freedom to create vibrant worship (not that we always succeed!).

In line with these strengths are three further articles in this edition: the Moderator's Letter about the new Unitarian Christian Association project for Sierra Leone (working with Christian Aid). Do come to our Lance Garrard lecture on Saturday 29th October in Cambridge to hear more about this aid project. (And by the way, our involvement was inspired by the appeal by GA Chief Officer, Derek McAuley, in the last *Herald*). Then there's an article about the worldwide Charter for Compassion and its early successes in uniting people of many different faiths. Finally, fascinating questions about Jesus and his mission, from a Free Christian perspective. Enjoy!

Jim Corrigan is a ministry student at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.

The Unitarian Christian Association is an affiliated society of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, which has as its Object:

'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.'

Moderator's Letter: Project Sierra Leone

The month of October 2011 sees the launch of an effort by our Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) to raise at least £5,000 over the coming two years. This will be the single greatest effort the UCA has made in its 20 years of existence, and forms a real expression of faith and works.

The Christian Aid Partnership Scheme, which the UCA is officially pledging itself to enter, is a challenge to raise money for a specific organisation and project supported by Christian Aid. In this instance, the UCA will be working to support the Kailahun health project in Sierra Leone. This exciting new initiative seeks to improve the quality of emergency care services to communities close to Sierra Leone's eastern border in the Kailahun District.

Sierra Leone is one of the least developed countries in the world and the quality of health care available to most people is very poor. It has one of the highest maternal and child mortality rates, and over 60 per cent of the population is illiterate. Although the government established a health care system shortly after the end of the Civil War in 2003, little has been done to develop medical services in rural areas such as Kailahun, one of the regions worst hit by the war. Women and girls in particular continue to suffer from lack of access to education, training and health services. They remain the most impoverished and vulnerable members of society.

Through this project, two Christian Aid partners, the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone and SEND-West Africa, are working with local institutions and communities to increase the quality of care offered to mothers and babies at two local hospitals, and more generally to improve health services in the area. Work is already underway. A survey of health services has been completed and a local theatre group is working on drama to communicate the project's aims to local communities.

The Unitarian Christian Association has chosen to support this project because it feels that an active faith should bear fruit in the love and care of others. All congregations and individuals within the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (with the co-operation of the Faith and Public Issues Commission) will be given an opportunity to contribute to this valuable effort to raise at least £5,000.

The good news is that all money raised will be match-funded by the European Union on 3:1 ratio, which has the potential of turning £5,000 into £20,000 (with gift aid)! This initiative will be launched at the UCA's gathering on Saturday, 29th October 2011 at Cambridge Memorial (Unitarian) Church, where a Christian Aid speaker will be giving the annual Lance Garrard Lecture. It is hoped that the project will enable our liberal faith to improve the lives of many people in a nation that needs our prayers and practical support. I hope you can be part of this effort.

The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould is Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, and Minister of Nazareth Unitarian Chapel, Padiham, Lancashire.



The President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, the Rev Dr Ann Peart, brought greetings to the 20th Anniversary celebrations of the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) at Oldham Unitarian Church (Greater Manchester) on 16th July 2011. She is pictured here with the UCA Moderator, the Rev Jeff Gould.



The UCA officer group met in brilliant sunshine (as ever!) at Wilmslow (south of Manchester) on 30th September, 2011. Pictured (from front centre, clockwise): Jeff Gould, Cathy Fozard, Alex Bradley, Denise Birks, Bob Pounder, Jim Corrigan. (Jean Bradley unfortunately could not be present). (Photo: Bob Pounder)

Facing up to Transylvanian challenges

Jim Corrigan reports on a recent visit to Hungarian Unitarian communities, where he found a faith that endures

Transylvania is home to a thriving Unitarian community, one that is almost 450 years old, but which is experiencing a problem all-to-familiar to us in the West – namely, that young people drift away from church once they become teenagers.

In Spring this year, I was fortunate to visit Unitarian communities in Hungary and Romania (in Transylvania) on a travel bursary. Although I discovered that the Church there is facing serious problems, it was inspiring to find that Transylvanian Unitarians are resisting decline in imaginative ways. I will return to this point later, but first a little history ...

The earliest surviving Unitarian community in the world is found in Transylvania, it dates back to the Reformation of 16th century Europe. In fact, Transylvania is the only place in Continental Europe where the Unitarians survived the religious persecution of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, in which other radical elements like the Anabaptists also suffered. So why did the Unitarians survive in Transylvania alone?

Well the chief reason was because of a Proclamation of 1568, known as the Diet of Torda, which proclaimed religious tolerance and freedom of conscience. It gave recognition and protection to four religions in Transylvania: Catholic, Reformed (or Calvinist), Lutheran and Unitarian. It was a Unitarian Bishop, Francis David, who played the key role in the debate at the Diet of Torda. Happily the Prince of Transylvania at that time, Janos Sigismund, was a Unitarian too – and so the edict became part of the Constitution. It was said that everyone in the main town, Kolozsvár, became a Unitarian. But the Prince died shortly afterward, being succeeded by a Catholic: and restrictions began to be placed on Unitarians.

In fact, varying degrees of persecution were to continue against them over the next 200 to 300 years -- and later under Communism in the latter part of last century, when all religions were restricted. But the fact that Unitarians retained a constitutional right to exist, together with their strong sense of identity, enabled them to survive in Transylvania through the centuries.

The anti-Trinitarian theology of Francis David of Transylvania was to develop in a radical direction, to become quite similar to modern Unitarianism: a belief that God is One, not a Trinity, and that Jesus was not God, simply a man, albeit God's greatest teacher – and so we should follow his teachings but we should not worship him. This put Francis David at odds with other anti-Trinitarians of the time, particularly the Socinians (in Transylvania) and the Polish Brethren, who believed Jesus was worthy of devotion, that he was divine, although not fully God.



A Sunday evening experimental service for young Unitarians in Kolozsvar, Transylvania, in April. Note the flaming chalice symbol on the banner, and the youthful musical band at the front.

A geographic point to note is that Transylvania (a large region, literally ‘the land beyond the forests’) was part of Hungary during the Reformation, and the people living there then were Hungarian. In fact, Transylvania was to remain part of Hungary until after the First World War, when it was granted to Romania by the Western allies. However, to this day the Hungarian population there retains a powerful sense of identity: they’ve kept their language, their customs and their faith (in fact, those same four faiths recognised during the Reformation) – and this at a time when more and more Romanian-speakers have come into Transylvania to settle. Romanians are now the majority there, and are overwhelmingly Romanian Orthodox in religion -- relations between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania have been strained, although attempts are being made to improve these.

So what’s the state of Unitarianism in Transylvania today? Well, Unitarians number 58,000; it’s the second largest Unitarian community in the world after the United States (which is numerically about twice as big). Unitarians make up about 5% of the Hungarian population of Transylvania, but their faith has a unique recognition and status.

So are they different from British Unitarians. Yes, they are!

How so? Well, for a start they have a Bishop as head of their church, in fact until recently there were two Hungarian Unitarian Bishops, one in Hungary itself, in Budapest, and one in Transylvania. (I was fortunate to visit Budapest on my trip too – just to say that Unitarians there number only a couple of thousand; the church there was founded by Transylvanian Unitarians in the 19th century). The two branches of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, in Hungary and Romania, are in the process of re-uniting (they were separated under Communism) – and so there will only be one Bishop in future, in

Transylvania. But the Bishop is elected, and can only serve two terms, so in reality is more like a moderator than an episcopal leader. The church is run by elected councils, and so is basically Reformed in character.

Hungarian Unitarians remain deeply Christian in their beliefs and practice, albeit a dissenting branch of Christianity. This is different from Unitarianism in the UK, which has become diverse in theology, with people of all faiths and none welcomed into membership.

Church life among Hungarian Unitarians is highly-organised. They have a Unitarian creed and catechism, both of which affirm a basic Unitarian theology. Youngsters learn the catechism for a year before they can be confirmed within the church (as young teenagers), and only after this can they partake of communion. You will have noticed I said they have a creed, something we Unitarians in Britain have never had. Their creed is short: it affirms belief in One God, 'creator of life and providential Father', and in Jesus 'our true teacher'. Interestingly, this creed affirms a belief in the holy spirit, so perhaps we could call our Transylvanian cousins 'Binatarians'. I jest, they maintain the spirit is simply a manifestation of the single Godhead.

So what about worship? Well, their Sunday morning service remains almost unchanged since Reformation times, Word-dominated in the best Protestant tradition. The Minister, dressed in a black cloak, stands in the high pulpit almost the entire time. From there, he or she (yes there are women ministers) leads prayer, Bible readings and delivers a lengthy sermon. There is no lectionary to follow, but only the Bible may be used for the readings.

Attendance at worship tends to be about one-tenth of the members of a congregation. The two Sunday morning services I attended in main Transylvanian centres attracted 140 and 200 people, so these were big congregations, up to 2,000-strong or more. Communion is regarded very seriously, and is held four times a year: at Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Almost the entire membership partakes of Communion, so two, three or even four services are held on these days to accommodate everyone. There are about 130 Unitarian congregations in Transylvania (almost as many active ones as we have in the United Kingdom), and they have 110 ministers, so many more serving ministers than we have in Britain.

Thanks to the generosity of my Unitarian hosts, I travelled right around Transylvania, seeing the bigger centres, but also valleys and small villages where almost everyone is Unitarian. I went up into the beautiful Carpathian mountains, which bound Transylvania. I visited the two schools run by the Unitarians, and the seminary where ministers train – and I met many church leaders, including the Bishop of Transylvania. I received tremendous hospitality wherever I went.

Although Unitarians there are much stronger than we are in Britain, they face real problems. Unitarianism in Transylvania is a family religion, passed down through the generations, you are born a Unitarian and you die one; converts to the faith are extremely rare. This is both a strength and a weakness. They have a strong core, but it is difficult to expand beyond this.

Economically, Romania today is in a bad way – it seems to have endured some of the worst of communism and now some of the worst of capitalism. Most of the inefficient factories closed after the fall of communism, but they have not been replaced. Agriculture is not being supported either. So migration to Europe for work claims scores of younger people. The Unitarians are losing about a thousand members each year, that's 10,000 in the past decade.

And youngsters, as I said earlier, nowadays tend to drift away from the church after confirmation. They are as much part of the Internet age as young people elsewhere and they say they find Unitarian services boring. And yet older people often want to keep the traditional styles of service they have grown up with.

How are these dilemmas to be resolved? I was happy to find that the Unitarian Church in Transylvania is resisting decline in a number of ways. One of their great assets is a vigorous ministry. Ministry students are all young (unlike some of ours!) and they undergo intensive training, for six years now (with the final two years spent mainly in congregations). Talking to ministers around the country, I found them very aware of the challenges facing their denomination, and seemingly full of the energy and intelligence needed to tackle these.

So how are they going about this? Well, firstly by reviving church life, introducing spiritual and cultural activities within congregations and communities of the kind we are accustomed to here in Britain. More Unitarian ministers are being trained, with the aim of providing more deputies in the bigger congregations, to ease ministers' heavy workloads.

And most particularly, they are trying to re-engage with their young. Experimental services are now held on Sunday evenings in the two big centres to attract the youth; about 35 attended the one I went to in Kolozsvár. It was certainly different – singing with guitars and drums, film clips on screens, a colourful banner (which carried the flaming chalice logo of international Unitarianism; it's worth noting that Transylvanian Unitarians have resisted adopting this symbol, as they associate candles with Roman Catholicism and their own eviction from churches). Finally, there is a very active youth programme, nationally and in congregations.

Transylvanian Unitarians feel quite isolated, and are keen to strengthen links with Unitarians in Britain and the United States, and with groups like the Remonstrants in the Netherlands. They



The serpent and dove are the symbols of the Hungarian Unitarian Church (in Hungary and Transylvania), as this church window emblem shows. (The reference is to Jesus's instructions to his disciples, Matthew 10:16).

would welcome more Unitarian visitors. However, a warning: one of the few things they dislike about visitors is a morbid interest in Dracula – this fantasy conjured up by Bram Stoker in the late 19th Century is not at all popular, I discovered!

Many American Unitarian Universalist congregations have strong partnerships with Transylvanian congregations, while only a couple of ours in the UK still do. Perhaps more of our congregations could consider forging links? I will be



Villages in the Western Carpathian mountains provide an excellent base for Transylvanian holidays.

happy to advise on this, so please contact me if you are interested. Unitarian visitors to Transylvania will be warmly welcomed, and there are comfortable and reasonably-cheap places to stay in cities and in the Carpathian mountains. Journeys around Unitarian heritage sites can be arranged. Getting to Transylvania, and travelling around within it, are also relatively easy and quite cheap.

To draw this to a close: what can we learn from Transylvanian Unitarians? Certainly, their dedication to the Unitarian Christian cause through centuries of persecution is deeply admirable. Theirs is a faith which has endured. However, I do not believe British Unitarians can return to a simple Unitarian theology, and we certainly would not want to adopt a creed. Our denomination did not originate as Unitarian, and we have never really been exclusively Unitarian in our theology anyway. As is noted elsewhere in this edition, we in Britain inherit a Free Christian tradition as well as a Unitarian one. In more recent times, British Unitarians have embraced diverse beliefs (although oddly, this has often meant welcoming all faiths except mainstream Christianity!).

Do I have an abiding memory of my time in Hungary and Transylvania? Well, several. One of the strongest? -- the simple yet intense devotion within a Unitarian service. As each person comes into church, a silent prayer:

I have entered your house of worship, oh gracious God. My prayers are seeking you, and I hear your voice. Loving God, be with me, show me your holy face. Fill my heart and my spirit, let me feel your loving presence.

A quiet contemplative calm fills the space, and continues through the service. Transylvanian Unitarians seek to take this calm faith into all aspects of their lives during the week. That is a spirit that we could all emulate.

Creating an inclusive church in Belfast

A bold experiment is taking place in Northern Ireland, as *Jim Corrigan* discovered

A confession: when I tell Unitarian friends my view that the Free Christian tradition could hold the key to our future, their eyes glaze over. ‘Not again!’, they seem to say. Then they counter: ‘Where is there a Free Christian congregation that can appeal to modern Unitarians and also to these Trinitarians you keep going on about? Please show us just one!’

And I must admit then I am rather stumped. We do still have a handful of proudly Free Christian congregations in our General Assembly (non-denominational, creedless churches which appeal to Unitarians, Trinitarians and those who reject these labels). But their worship styles tend to be traditional -- nothing wrong with that you may say, but that won’t satisfy these Unitarian friends of mine, oh no, they want modern, up-to-the minute worship.

Then I met the Rev Chris Hudson earlier this year, and he told me about his All Souls Non-Subscribing congregation in Belfast; he said it was building a truly-inclusive church, socially and theologically. I decided to pay a weekend visit to Belfast for *The Herald*.

On the Saturday night of my trip in early summer, the music at the All Souls engagement party was loud – so much so, that the well-turned-out woman next to me leaned closer as she confided: “You see, I’ve never felt welcome in a church before, this is the first place I’ve felt at home in.”

She is a former Salvation Army officer and is now business manager at a Belfast hospice. She’d joined All Souls eight months earlier after trying many churches. “Once they find out I have a female partner, I’m no longer made welcome,” she told me. And her theology? Strongly Trinitarian. So how does she feel about being in a church that includes Unitarians, humanists and agnostics? She enjoys the diversity of All Souls, she says.

All Souls is part of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, a sister denomination to British Unitarians, closely linked historically. In the past few years, with the Rev Chris Hudson as Minister, All Souls has taken bold steps in creating ‘an inclusive church’. How is it going about this?

First, the church has been reaching out to the gay community in Belfast. Chris Hudson was the first Minister to wear a clerical collar on the Pride March in Belfast three years ago. Now the official service to end Pride Week is held at All Souls, and Chris has been honoured as a Hero of Belfast Pride.

Meanwhile, the congregation’s membership (over 200-strong) is beginning to reflect the

growing ethnic diversity of its South Belfast surrounds.

Then there's an increasing theological diversity at All Souls. The Non-Subscribers are traditionally liberal Christian, they reject imposed creeds and welcome Unitarians, Trinitarians and those who reject such labels (they are in fact very similar to our own Free Christian tradition, one our denomination often seems to forget about, despite our General Assembly still being named 'Unitarian and Free Christian'!).

Now *worship* at All Souls is becoming more diverse too. A Jesus Praise Band made up of young people alienated by prejudice in evangelical circles, has joined All Souls. This seven-strong 'Jesus group', with guitars and percussion, leads the singing of two hymns each Sunday morning from the side aisle in this big church, hymns to 'Jesus my Saviour', and including numbers like 'Shine, Jesus, Shine'.

The other two hymns are organ-led, more traditional Unitarian and liberal Christian in sentiment. And the choir at All Souls also sings at Sunday morning worship, one traditional song and one contemporary one – again accompanied by the organ.

Members of the Jesus Praise Band told me how much they feel included at All Souls. In fact the engagement party I attended on my weekend visit was between two male members of the Band. Speaking to them, I found they were not crazed 'Jesus freaks', but articulate young people deeply appreciative of the tolerance they have found in this community.

The Rev Chris Hudson's theology is Unitarian Christian, and Sunday services include the Lord's Prayer. However, readings tend to be from a variety of religious traditions and from world literature (unlike most Non-Subscribing Presbyterian congregations in Northern Ireland which base their readings on the Bible).



A Jesus Praise Band leads the singing of a Sunday morning hymn at All Souls Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Interestingly, Chris describes himself as a Universalist too – and the church is attracting people from other faiths, including from Jewish and Shinto backgrounds.

Chris Hudson is a highly respected figure in Ireland, a Dublin-born Catholic who became a Unitarian while working as a trade unionist and peace activist there (and who served as a peace envoy for the Dublin government to Northern Protestant paramilitaries during the Troubles, work for which he was awarded an MBE).

All Souls is a growing church - average attendance on Sunday has risen to around 70. The congregation as a whole is involved in the growth strategy – last December it adopted a detailed 12-page plan for achieving growth, and it is now carrying this out.

The church is gaining an increasing profile in Belfast. The first religious celebration for a civil partnership in Northern Ireland was held recently at All Souls, with the Northern Ireland Justice Minister and other leading politicians attending.



The Rev Chris Hudson chats to one of his All Souls congregation after the service.

Social and cultural activities in the congregation are thriving, and several members are taking training courses in leading worship (one of whom hopes to train as a minister).

All Souls seems to pose tough questions for our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination in the United Kingdom. In recent years we have embraced diverse beliefs – yet we often seem unable to appreciate the implications of this position. We say we celebrate all faiths, and we embrace them with gusto, including in our services, and yet we seem quite unable to accommodate mainstream Christianity.

So a key question for British Unitarians and Free Christians must be: does the inclusivity of All Souls in Belfast, social and *theological*, point a way forward for our denomination? Yes, praise bands may be more acceptable at worship in Northern Ireland than the UK, that's more in keeping with their traditions, and some in our congregations would undoubtedly find it hard to accept a Jesus Praise Band at their service.

But if we want to attract young people again, don't we need to start thinking 'outside the box'? Most young people in Britain today who are attracted to Christianity seem to favour Pentecostal and evangelical expressions of our faith. They don't want dogma, but they do want less-structured services with modern music and modern instruments, and, above all, they want to express a belief in Jesus as their personal saviour.

To accommodate young people like this (many of whom must surely be alienated by prejudice found in evangelical circles, as they have been in Northern Ireland), to allow them into our churches and chapels, *including giving them a voice within worship*, would surely not mean abandoning our Unitarian principles but rather giving expression to the tolerance we talk so endlessly about?



Who are the UU Christians?

There's a rich variety of Christianity within Unitarian Universalism in America, writes *Tom Wintle*

Some gather for worship around a Communion Table, with all the pomp and pageantry of the Episcopalians. Others meet, not in churches, but in living rooms for discussion and Bible study. Some belong to white-steepled first parish churches on New England town greens where ancient Puritan covenants are faithfully recited every Sunday, where the Lord's Prayer is a standard part of worship, and where *'of course Unitarians are Christians!'*

Others belong to churches where the Bible is seldom read, no Cross is evident, and the congregation proudly emphasises its differences from orthodox Christianity. Some could join in saying the Apostles' Creed in an ecumenical worship service, and others are more comfortable expressing their Christianity in a peace march or working in a shelter for battered women. Many would do both.

What these members of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship have in common is their conviction that one can be both a Unitarian Universalist (UU) and a Christian, both thoroughly modern and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, many would say it was precisely within Unitarian Universalism that they became Christians. Within the theological freedom of our churches, they found the 'space' to become Christians at their own rates. Within the historic faiths of Unitarianism and Universalism, they found the expression of a creative, vibrant, and believable liberal Christianity. Within the liberal churches' tradition of social action, they sought and found a theological basis and a personal inspiration rooted in the ministry of Jesus.

Perhaps most importantly, they found within Unitarian Universalism a religious home where their questions were not viewed with suspicion and their doubts were accepted. For many, here at last was a place to grow in faith!

In the rich theological diversity of liberal Christianity, four broad categories, or emphases, can be identified:

Classical UU Christians

Finding the dogmatism of rigid orthodoxy to be unacceptable, and the emptiness of pure secularism (or *'trendy liberalism'*) to be unsatisfying, these Unitarian Universalists affirm the liberal Christianity of classical Unitarianism and classical Universalism.

Theirs is a low-keyed Christianity that focuses on the human life and ethical teachings of Jesus. They see doctrines such as the Trinity and the Atonement as unnecessary, perhaps prefer to speak of *christenings* rather than *baptisms*, and view communion as a quiet memorial of the life of Jesus. The Bible, interpreted with reason and modern scholarship,

provides the myths and symbols and stories that enable them to speak of God and to instill moral values.

Believing that theirs is *'the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus,'* they see the Galilean as a great teacher and the exemplar of a life of love to God and love to humankind. In the words of one layperson: *'Jesus is the leader you don't adore, but can't ignore.'*

To be a Christian, they might say, is *'to follow Jesus.'*

Catholic Christians

Catholic, or Ecumenical, Christians are attracted to a broad and inclusive Christianity that transcends old denominational differences and seeks out the best from all of Christian history. They are informed by both Protestant dissent and Catholic tradition. With Ignatius of Antioch, they believe *'where Christ is, there is the Universal Church.'*



The Rev Tom Wintle outside Weston church in Massachusetts.

Theologically, they affirm the unity of God who is revealed in the Christ-event, in the person of Jesus Christ and in the believing reception of the Church. Liturgically, they are nourished by the sacraments, the psalms, the proclamation of the gospel (and are now rediscovering the value of the lectionary), and the great prayers and hymns and anthems of the Church. They are interested in personal disciplines of prayer and spiritual growth.

Believing that our Unitarian Universalism provides a theological freedom afforded in few other churches, they participate in ecumenical dialogue, feel the brokenness of Christ's Church, and affirm the common discipleship shared by all Christians.

To be a Christian, they might say, is *'to be part of the Body of Christ.'*

Liberation Christians

Finding in Christianity a radical call for the liberation of the oppressed, these Unitarian Universalist Christians emphasise the prophetic and ethical demands of the Gospel.

Christ was *'the one for others,'* and the Church is the community of discipleship called to help heal the brokenness of the world. Whether the issue is urban ministry or international ministry, poverty or human liberation, the Spirit is present to ensure, empower, embarrass, and challenge; to demand a world better than it is now envisioned by the Crucified Christ.

To be a Christian, they might say, is *'to do the work of Christ.'*

Borrowing trinitarian terminology, these three might be summarised as three unitarianisms.

The Classical UU Christians have a kind of *unitarianism of the Father*, seeing the divine as a transcendent Creator. God is real, but somewhat distant.

The Catholic Christians have a kind of *unitarianism of the Son*, believing God is known in Christ and his Church.

The Liberation Christians have a kind of *unitarianism of the Spirit*, seeing God in the empowering work of the Holy Spirit which is found not only, not even primarily, in the Church, but in the world — urging, pulling, and dragging us to the redeemed life.

And all three are universalists, believing that God loves us, all of us. Nor would they deny that God’s love is revealed in many other religions. As one minister put it, God is like the light which shines through cathedral stained-glass windows: we cannot see the light itself, but only as it come through the various windows; and UU Christians affirm that they do, indeed, see God through the Christian window.

Questioning Christians

Finally, there is a fourth category of UU Christians — those who are drawn to Christianity, attracted to the figure of Jesus, but are uncertain of what it all means or how to reconcile Christian faith with the assumptions and the scepticism of a modern secular world.

In a sense, we are all questioning Christians, all moving theologically, and that is why we are Unitarian Universalist: the freedom from creed, hierarchy and set liturgies gives us both the room to explore and the necessity of creating our own faith.

If it all seems terribly chaotic and unorganised, I would suggest it is nevertheless a logical result of Puritan congregational polity and Unitarian creedlessness.

If it seems wonderfully rich and creative, I suggest it is the result of the diversity of God’s spiritual gifts.

There are Unitarian Universalist Christians — and we invite you to join us in the great adventure of faith.

The Rev Dr Thomas D. Wintle is the Senior Minister of the First Parish, Weston, Massachusetts.



‘What is holding us back?’

In a bracing critique of Unitarianism Universalism, *Victoria Weinstein* says its gravest fault may be a failure to understand itself

There is a burning question I’ve heard repeatedly during my life as a Unitarian Universalist in America. It goes like this: "We're so great: we're smart but we don't claim to have all the answers, we're the obvious affiliation for people who don't want to be told what to believe -- and so why are we not a much larger denomination?!"

I have a very passionate response to this question. It comes from being a Unitarian Universalist (UU) all my life, and having visited and worshipped with, preached in, or consulted thousands of individual UUs and around 50 congregations. This is going to be a bit of a ‘barn-burner’, but please remember that the preacher's job is to ‘comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable!’

First, a bit of context: Unitarian Universalists number around 100,000 in the United States. We have about 1,000 congregations in America and around the world. We are a minute number of people. There are many thousands more Muslims in the Boston area alone than there are Unitarian Universalists in the entire world. As a denomination, we are not growing. Our tiny growth percentage over the past decades in the US is puny when considered next to general population growth. We welcome a small handful -- if any -- new congregations each year, and the vast majority of our churches have less than 100 members, and most of our congregations are located in Massachusetts.

However, that said, we should know that the mainline Protestant church in America in general is dying, and fast. By ‘mainline Protestant’ I mean those churches and movements that are not evangelical, not independent mega-churches, and not one of the ethnic, immigrant churches -- most of which tend to be either orthodox or evangelical (to read the Bible as literal truth, espouse conservative ‘morals’, are patriarchal and hierarchical, are Holy Spirit-centred, emphasising a born-again conversion experience, and ministering to a particular ethnic group). So times have changed a great deal.

The fact is that church life and churches, and not necessarily WHAT we do but the WAY we do it, is unappealing to people who never give church a second thought. Friendship, mutual support, cultivating reverence, service -- these ideas are great but why pursue them in such a fusty institution as the Church? We come out in the cold on a Sunday morning and sit on a slab of wood to hear an instrument that the average American under the age of 50 hasn’t heard before, listening to a preacher talk for way longer than almost anyone talks at one stretch anymore, shaking hands with friends and strangers, drinking coffee while standing around in an open room with no computers, not going anywhere -- it's alien to people today. The building and what we do in our churches feels like a bizarre throwback to American suburbanites, which is where the vast majority of UU congregations are located: the suburbs. One remark you'll hear from our folks all over the

country is: "People don't join UU congregations because they want to be told what to believe."

I am always amazed at this folly. It is thoroughly disrespectful, it's a gross oversimplification of the complex reasons people affiliate with churches and it reveals a lack of understanding about the culture of our Unitarian Universalist congregations. We imagine that the most noticeable thing about us is our theological diversity and openness. In other words, we tend to believe our own press.

But that isn't what people see when they walk into our congregations. What they see is the people: a crowd of almost all white people who look alike, sound alike, embrace the same causes, are self-righteously critical of the same things, who make the same insulting remarks about 'other' religions, and are just as intolerant, insular, prone to bickering and as out-of-touch with reality as people in any other church. Yet, these UUs aggressively market themselves as an alternative to those 'other' churches! That wouldn't be such a crime, except that we are the people who say of ourselves: "We're about community! We're about the seeking after wisdom! We're about openness to a variety of points of view (*as long as it's not THAT point of view*). We're intellectually curious and broader minded than everyone else! We're welcoming!"

What we should say is: "We're a religious community. We find an awesome opportunity to be together, to try to live a deeper life than we can manage to create on our own. We're trying to take care of each other, and to find some meaning in this insanity called life. We like this old way of gathering on Sunday morning. We love tradition and history. We love to laugh together, and we're thrilled by life and beauty and creativity and we really like to sing and eat together. We get into squabbles like any other community. We don't always see eye-to-eye but like any other community that cares about its mission and vision, we stick it out. We're prone to being proud of ourselves like any other church, but you know, we're proud of ourselves for good reason. A lot of us work really hard to be good people; that's all we're trying to do. As far as our theology goes, we believe in one God at most, and other than that we believe in love. You have to spend some time with us to find out how our religion works because it's ultimately about being in community. We'd be so happy if you'd come join with us."

So I would identify our first problem as not having an educated and realistic sense of our identity, context and our own limited perspective. We are not, as one of our recent marketing campaigns tried to brand us: 'The Uncommon Denomination'. We are a religious movement that could be properly identified as the extreme left of the Reformation; a group that *imagines* itself as a kind of protest movement against fundamentalism and orthodoxy, a temple for world religions, and a radical innovator in the religious landscape -- but a group that is, *in reality*, a mainline Protestant church that differs from other mainline Protestant churches mainly because we say out loud that we have our doubts about God, we openly welcome an atheistic viewpoint, we openly acknowledge that we're not all on the same page theologically, and we have an eclectic and creative worship tradition.

In other words, as a group of people with certain ideas, we are pretty indistinguishable

from any of the other mainline Protestants in the United States in our socio-economic demographic with similar levels of education. What differentiates us is that we don't worship with a prayer book or according to a Christian liturgy – again because we have evolved in our sense of religious identity to something I would call 'eclecticism'.

We are not radical. You know who's radical right now? The young Christians who are gathering in each other's homes to be followers of Jesus with no clergy, no church building and no budget. In some cases they combine their incomes and live together, they are highly educated, totally modern, hip, progressive, often have high-paying jobs in technology, are widely read, respectful, and interested in world religions. They practice yoga and dance to African drumming. They have been to India and Southeast Asia. They ride their bikes to work. They are vegan and try not to accumulate possessions, eschewing American consumerism as the biggest threat to the planet. Now, most Unitarian Universalists don't know about them, or any of the other thousands of fascinating, contemporary religious movements around today, because (among other things) they hear 'Christian' and think they know what that means and close their minds to it.



The Rev Victoria Weinstein leads a workshop at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel, Hampstead, north London, in July. She spent a month in Britain at the invitation of the London District.

Unitarian Universalism is not growing partly, I am certain, because we are so insular and anti-ecumenical. We think we are cutting-edge. We are not. Our theological questioning, our rejection of orthodox Christian doctrine, and our embracing of eclectic spiritual practices and a variety of sources of wisdom are not cutting-edge, and have not been for many decades. We are not a unique religious people in the American landscape, although we persist in this self-image. We are not unique in our intellectual search for meaning, our commitment to science, our comfort with agnosticism and atheism, and our post-modern worldview. The things that many Unitarians get excited about in 'new' religious scholarship were actually new 50 years ago.

We are not unique in our progressive attitudes toward sexuality, environmentalism, or other social issues. Those UUs who call us '*the* social justice tradition' fail to recognise that we are just a tiny (if very loud and passionate!) dot on the faith-based social justice scene. We are not '*the* social justice tradition'. We are not '*the* people of deeds, not creeds'. We are neither of these things. Our commitment to social justice and deeds rather than doctrine is not unique to the Unitarian Universalists. We are simply one small religious movement strongly committed to social justice.

Because the vast majority of Unitarian Universalists are so adamantly anti-ecumenical and neither fellowship with or regularly consult people in other religious groups about

religious matters (especially not Christians), we have an embarrassingly limited sense of who we are and how much we have in common with other religious liberals -- many of whom can be found in the Jewish, Muslim, Protestant and Catholic traditions. There are millions of Catholic progressives. The Catholic church has an extraordinarily impressive tradition of both scholarship and of commitment to progressive social change. Maybe not in our immediate acquaintance, but worldwide: yes.

Most UUs know nothing of liberation theology, a place where I personally think we lost our opportunity to be a major religious denomination, but that's a story for another time. We are not unique in our perspective on Jesus, the Bible, and the questioning of God. As I said, we are somewhat unique in that our worship services reflect these questions and our post-modernist orientation while other mainstream Protestant churches retain traditional forms of liturgy. But in the minds of most people -- we are very much the same.

So why does this matter? Because, I think, there is a bizarre disconnect for people when they walk through the doors of a UU congregation and are trying to figure out what it's all about. If they've done some research in advance (say on the Internet -- www.beliefnet.com brings us lots of visitors), they have every reason to be confused: *Wow. This looks a lot like every other church I've ever been in. They do most of the same things except they took most of the 'God' and 'Jesus' out of the hymns. "We're into diversity!" Gee, it looks like a lot of educated, white, middle or upper middle-class people to me. They dress the same, they drive the same cars, they vote the same, they listen to the same radio stations, they read the same books and care about the same causes. They seem pretty not diverse to me...* Now, some of these seekers might love what they see and stay, but a lot of them don't. They say: "I get it. It's just a church."

There's nothing wrong with being just a church, but we have to know our culture, and see ourselves in the broader perspective. We need to develop a much more humble sense of reality and remember that we are as much a stereotype as the Bible-thumpers on the religious right. If we claim to be a more mature people than typical church people are, then we need to change our behaviour and adopt a different kind of presence: a truly mature, open and humble one. I don't mean false humility. I mean a humility that doesn't engage in the bashing of other traditions, isn't always emphasising what we reject about religion but that affirms what we do embrace and do believe -- and above all, one that isn't ignorant.

We are not THE radicals. We are not THE intellectuals. We are not THE social reformers. What are we? We are a quirky little denomination that tries to love the world and stay engaged with it. Why? Because we have inherited a tradition that says that it's this world that matters: the next one we know nothing about. We are a little religious movement that ardently believes in the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms. What we need is to become braver and more creative in how we envision church.

What we must realise, and not fret about too much, is the fact that the institution of the Church is not the only place where one can be inspired, challenged, experience community, learn love and service, and explore spiritual truths. It's the one that we love, but it's not the only one. We, therefore, are not competing with other churches -- and that's where contemporary Unitarian Universalism gets it so very wrong, I think -- but we

are in the same boat as all churches. Church involvement and membership is, at this time, just one choice for people in constructing a meaningful life.

But we love the church. We do have a charge to live into and to live up to. It is a charge inherited from our spiritual ancestors whose lives were so enriched by this institution. Remember though, that when they first gathered, they had one concept of church and they would find us unrecognisable as religious brethren today. Time marches on, and we march with it. If we are to survive as a religious movement we will have to be smarter than we have been -- and also wiser, braver, more humble and more visionary than we have been. If we truly believe in the goodness of our endeavour, then we cannot fail. And by that I mean that we will not, by the grace of the Spirit of Love, fail. And I also mean that we must not fail.

The Rev Victoria Weinstein is a Unitarian Universalist parish minister in Massachusetts in the United States, and a part-time lecturer in worship at Andover Newton Theological College. This is an edited version of a sermon she gave at her church earlier this year.



In the spirit of the Good Samaritan

The Charter for Compassion is inspiring people of many faiths to transform lives, writes *Feargus O'Connor*

In 2008 Karen Armstrong, the acclaimed writer and religious commentator, won the international Technology, Entertainment and Design Prize, which honours individuals with innovative ideas who have made an outstanding contribution to building a better world. She decided to ask its organisers to help her 'change the world' for the better in a crucial way. She sought to create a 'Charter for Compassion', whose mission would be to work across the globe to implement the Golden Rule, the religious ethic which underlies not only Christianity but all the great religions and ethical systems of the world. Thousands of people from various faith traditions contributed towards the process and the Charter for Compassion was launched in November 2009.

The Charter itself has already inspired community-based acts of compassion all over the world in places of worship, schools, universities and among voluntary organisations and individuals in every continent. Karen Armstrong herself has said that its message is about nothing less than 'transforming lives'.

The Charter has been affirmed by people of goodwill throughout the world, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. It has been endorsed by over 150 partner organisations, including Religions for Peace, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, the Three Faiths Forum, the International Association for Religious Freedom, and also by the Unitarian Universalist Association in America and our own General

Assembly here in Britain.

I am pleased to report that several leading ministers active in the Unitarian Christian Association were among the ministerial signatories to the original motion affirming the Charter, which was unanimously passed at this year's Annual Meetings in Swansea in Wales. Their support was much appreciated by the movers of the motion and the Charter for Compassion organisation itself.

The Charter has profound implications in politics, international relations and in the way we all treat each other in everyday life. Many of us consider it to be a particularly significant landmark in that it brings together the wisdom of the world's religions and offers all individuals of goodwill a heartfelt hope that all the world's peoples can live in harmony with each other and the planet which we not only inherit from those who have gone before but to bequeath to those who come after us.

Is this not truly in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the other religious teachings of Jesus Christ himself as reflected in the Gospels, the Epistle of James and the ideals of charity and altruism which inspire all that is best and most noble in the Christian tradition down the ages?

It was just this spirit of charity enjoined by the Golden Rule which inspired the monk Rahere in 1123 to found my local hospital in London, St Bartholomew's (or Barts as it is affectionately known), as a refuge for the sick and poor, as it did our post-War Government (in which two Unitarian Cabinet Ministers sat) to institute our precious National Health Service, also surely an embodiment of the Good Samaritan religious spirit? It continues to inspire what is most valuable in our Welfare State, with its ideal of care for all in need regardless of wealth or social status. It gives practical expression to our love of God through service to our neighbour, wherever she or he is to be found.

It is my hope that it will continue to inspire members of the Unitarian Christian Association in your work and witness as a liberal religious fellowship striving to live the ideals of the true Christian ethic, devoting ourselves to the service of God and our neighbour and living lives of charity and compassion for all.

One way in which the UCA honours the spirit of the Charter for Compassion is your support of Christian Aid, a charity which arguably more than any other opens our minds and our hearts to the plight of our neighbours in the global village we now inhabit. Whether we are helping a Palestinian boy on the West Bank, a destitute mother in the Horn of Africa, a Muslim victim of the Pakistan floods or a homeless refugee in Haiti or Libya, Christian Aid gives practical expression to that Samaritan spirit of love in action. We should also be inspired by the life and witness of one great Unitarian exemplar of that spirit of universal benevolence, William Ellery Channing, whose eloquence and kind heart were equally at the service of his liberal religion. It was his eloquence which drew the rich and fashionable to his sermons but it was his warm-hearted benevolence which drew him to the service of the poor of Boston.

One cold winter's day Channing was visiting poor families when he was warned not to go



The Unitarian London District Minister, the Rev David Usher, speaks at an inter-faith celebration of the Charter for Compassion at Golders Green Unitarians, north London, in early July. On his right is the Rev Feargus O'Connor, who chaired the meeting.

near a certain elderly couple. The neighbours told him they were dangerous. Feeling they might be in need of pastoral care, he went to an upstairs tenement room. He was moved to see that the old man and his wife were showing signs of mental illness. They were huddled and shivering in the bare unheated room, and half-starved because they were refusing to eat for fear of being poisoned.

Channing spoke gently to these poor frightened souls and they responded to the kindness they saw in his eyes. He persuaded them to eat and went off to get firewood and supplies of food. He continued to care for them for the rest of their lives.

Few preachers have matched the eloquence of William Ellery Channing. His words have moved many thousands and his fame has survived every generation since. But we Unitarians, as proud of we are of his great sermons, can be just as proud of his true goodness and compassion as a Unitarian minister who served the poor and, in the words of the New England Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier: 'restored the lost and bound up the spirit broken'.

Channing lived his religion in deeds. May we, as Jesus enjoined us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, do likewise.

The Rev Feargus O'Connor is Minister at Golders Green Unitarians in north London, and Hon. Secretary of the World Congress of Faiths.

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women—to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings, even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

- **The third Sunday in November (20 November 2011) has been designated by our General Assembly in Britain as ‘Charter for Compassion Sunday’, and Unitarian and Free Christian congregations are being urged to hold services on the Charter that Sunday. The Worship Panel is producing a pack called *Stirrings of Compassion* which will be available by then.**

‘Preach the good news’ to all creation

Did Jesus intend his message for the world? The Gospels do not supply an easy answer, argues *Tim Powell* – and nor do they support simple Unitarian or Trinitarian views of Jesus.

In Shiraz, in southern Iran, there are remains of an ancient Christian church. Carved in the stone over the doorway is this poem.

*Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.
We are a door that’s never locked.
If you are suffering any kind of pain,
stay near this door. Open it.*

These are words not of any Christian saint but of the 13th century Islamic mystic Jelaluddin Rumi, born in what is today Afghanistan.

Christianity is the largest and geographically most widespread world religion. It has been an *evangelical missionary religion* according to which when Jesus said ‘make disciples of all nations’ (*Matthew 28:19*) and ‘no-one comes to the Father except through me’ (*John 14:6*), this was taken to mean converting people from their existing faith to a new religion, an exclusive religion with a complex and, in fact, incomprehensible doctrine to which you have fully to subscribe in order to receive salvation.

Yet against this exclusive interpretation, Jesus has long been a figure of fascination to many who are not Christians. I want to open up another way of seeing Jesus, not as the founder of the world’s largest religion but as a holy one of God who taught a way of understanding God that is open to all. This offers an alternative view of being a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, that I think is truer to the Gospels.

Islam acknowledges Jesus as one of the great prophets, indeed there are references in the Qu’ran to him as the word of God. According to the Qur’an, a Muslim cannot be a Muslim if he rejects Jesus; and Jesus is regarded as one of the five greatest prophets of history, the others being Noah, Moses, Abraham and Muhammad.

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, a Hindu, said: *‘Jesus occupies in my heart the place of one of the greatest teachers ... I shall say to the Hindus that your life will be incomplete unless you reverentially study the teachings of Jesus...’* Swami Akhilananda (1894-1962), whose mission was to the West, interpreted Jesus Christ as one who is already an integral part of Hinduism. He said that the goal of Hindu dharma is self-realisation and Jesus Christ is the supreme example of the *‘soul which is totally illumined’*.

It is interesting how readily Buddhists, religiously non-theistic, and Christians have often found common ground. And then there’s Judaism. Jesus was of course a Jew, and there are Jews who regard Jesus as a great teacher in the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Lionel Blue has

written of his fascination with Jesus. The Chief Rabbi of Bulgaria from the 1940s to 1970s, Rabbi Daniel Zion, wrote in a song about Jesus: *'Only you bring me before the God of my fathers.'*

Unfortunately the initial persecution of early Christians and then the longer story of Christian mistreatment of Jews soured the relationship and it is only comparatively recently that the implications of the 'Jewishness' of Jesus have been taken seriously by Christians.

Not many theologians today would argue that either Jesus or his immediate disciples had any intention of founding a new religion to rival Judaism. They were Jews and they wanted to reform Judaism in line with their interpretation of scripture. It is a matter of some debate, we must acknowledge, whether Jesus even wanted his message to be spread beyond the Jewish people. Remember his words to his disciples, when first sending them out. They were to go to the lost children of Israel, and he specifically instructed them not to go the cities of the Samaritans or to the Gentiles.

However, it's not that simple. Jesus demonstrated an understanding that transcended religious allegiance – he remarked of the Centurion that never before had he encountered such faith. His parable of the Good Samaritan depicts a Samaritan as being more obedient to the commandment of God than pious Jews.

Perhaps persuaded by his encounters with non-Jews, Jesus did in fact take his mission beyond them, as John 4 records following his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. And the title of this sermon is taken from Mark 16:15, *'And he said to his followers: Go into all the world, and preach the good news to the whole creation.'* So it seems possible that Jesus did in fact urge his followers to take his word beyond Israel, as words ascribed to Jesus from after his resurrection suggest.

So we have in Jesus a figure who has found a place in the hearts of adherents to other world faiths. Luke also records (24:27) that Jesus instructed his followers that repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

We are used now to the idea that religions are like political parties. If you support the Conservatives in Britain you cannot at the same time support the Labour party. In religion therefore, if you are a Buddhist, you cannot be a Christian, it's an either/or. This is not an attitude that would have been held by the most people in the Roman world of 30AD. Exclusivity was an idea that the Jews had developed about their own religion, it was a great strength in maintaining their identity as a small nation occupying strategically important territory in a frequently hostile world. Theirs was a single jealous God who had no rivals.

How does Jesus fit into this? Was he exclusive or inclusive? We know that Jesus had little patience with barriers, but he was nevertheless a Jew, with all that meant in terms of identity.

The position held by *Christian Compass* is that Jesus's message, his insight into God's plan for humanity, is one above all of simplicity. It is so simple that little children can follow it, yet so profound that the learned could not comprehend it. It is expressed in the two great commandments, expounded in the Sermon on the Mount, illustrated in his parables

and manifested in his life and death. And, as Jesus says, although he taught as one with authority, it is not an original revelation of God's word. How perverse would that make God?

No, the eternal God does not change the rules and Jesus's teachings are in that sense nothing new. He calls for a return to the way of love and repentance. The Jews are special insofar as they ought to know this, having been specially selected by God to receive his word, but the way itself is for all. It does not have anything in it that is specially or uniquely applicable to Jews.



WHO IS JESUS? Christ bids farewell to his Apostles (painting by Duccio, detail from his Maesta, 1308-1311). (Wikipedia, public domain).

Do we then go along with those who say that they follow the religion *of* Jesus rather than the religion *about* Jesus?

I don't think it's that straightforward. Jesus did three things that mean we cannot regard him simply as a prophet reminding people of God's commandments. Firstly, he identified himself very closely with God the Father. So closely that Jews at the time wondered just who he was claiming to be. He maintained that messianic prophecies were fulfilled in him and that he had a special knowledge of his Father's will. Secondly, he gathered to him a body of followers to whom he imparted particular knowledge and entrusted particular tasks including that of spreading the good news. Thirdly, he gave instructions as to how he was to be memorialised. He established that the drinking of wine and eating of bread were a way not simply of preserving his memory but a means to establish a spiritual communion with him after his death. These are not the actions of a simple spiritual teacher.

So no, we cannot easily talk about the religion *of* Jesus as opposed to the religion *about* Jesus. We do still have to ask him, after 2,000 years, who are you?

We come back to Jesus the Jew. From the start of his ministry he identified himself with the prophecies of Isaiah. I believe he was consciously taking on the mantle of the suffering servant, God's chosen one, of Isaiah and through this, reconciling God and humanity in himself. This means that Jesus did have a particular view of his relationship to God. Paradoxically this view was both highly exalted – he had a uniquely close relation to the Father – and yet was one which displayed the utmost humility in that he pointed us to God, not to himself.

He reminded us that it was love of God and love of others that is indeed all the law and all the prophets, but then went further. By opening himself utterly to God he became the definitive example of this love personified. Moreover, the prophetic vision of Isaiah is one that sees the love of God taken beyond the restoration of Israel, to encompass all nations of the world, the beginning of the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Where does this get us?

There is indeed good reason why the early Church came to see Jesus as the Logos, the word of God made flesh. Nevertheless, I would maintain that subscription to a doctrine that insists the only acceptable notion of Christ is as a component part of a Trinity of Deity is no more true to Jesus than the rigorous observation of regulations of the Pharisees. I am arguing that we need a way of seeing Jesus that is open to all. I believe this is a truer (and more effective) way of spreading the good news that Jesus brought than insisting on conversion and adherence to a creed.

Yet as we saw from the sentiments expressed by followers of other religions, it is not only the message of Jesus that attracts – it is a message you can find expressed in other faiths – it is also the person of Jesus. What is it about him that remains so magnetic, 2,000 years later?

What is it about him that makes so many accept and follow him as their lord and his teachings as their rule for life, regardless that they offer no path to fame or fortune?

I believe it is because he brought God so close to us. In his life, teaching and healing, in his person in fact, he made God's love so accessible and God's word so clear to us. He demonstrated that the kingdom of God was within the grasp of the poor, the oppressed and the sinful.

Unfortunately his learned and pious contemporaries, who thought God's favour was confined to the deserving, couldn't understand it, couldn't believe it and certainly couldn't allow it, and killed him for it. And today so many learned and pious Christians insist on surrounding Jesus with rituals and rules, dogmas and doctrines to keep his message of hope exclusively for faithful members of the Christian club.

But what of the words: 'No-one comes to the Father except through me'. Do they not indicate that salvation is limited to Christians? No, they refer back to Isaiah's prophecy that the suffering servant will be exalted by God and will assume a role in judgement (*Isaiah 42:1-4*). And let us remember that Jesus also says that not all those who say, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of God (*Matthew 7:21*).

It is precisely *because* Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, that he should be for all who love God and love others, regardless of religious adherence. It is not conditional. Jesus does not say, I am the way, and the truth and the life if you say you believe that I am the second person of the Trinity. He does say, talking to his disciples, that if you trust me and what I have said and done, then God is with you as He is with me.

Jesus wanted all men and women to hear his Father's word and learn of his Father's love. He taught this and he lived this. So this means that everything that makes for separation, every piece of ritual and dogma, everything that makes it harder for non-Christians to find the message of Jesus is not merely regrettable, it is to be abolished. Does this sound radical? Yes, it does. But is it any more radical than the words Jesus spoke?

Of course, the institution that is Christianity exists and Jesus Christ is its heart. It has accomplished great and noble things and the *Christian Compass* – and this Chapel – come from within its tradition. Yet I believe the life and teaching of Jesus necessarily take us beyond the traditional boundaries of what is thought of as the Christian faith. I believe that what we are called to do is to take Jesus beyond Christianity, to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. To tell men and women of all religions and nations – Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jew, even Christian – the good news that Jesus showed us that we can be sure that all people who try to love God and love others are blessed by the Lord.

Dr Tim Powell is Treasurer of Bath Unitarian Fellowship and was co-editor of *The Christian Compass*. This is an edited version of a sermon given at a *Christian Compass* gathering at The Chapel in the Garden, Bridport, Dorset, in 2007.

Christian Compass funds come to UCA

In 2008, a magazine established to promote Free Christianity within our denomination and beyond, *The Christian Compass*, ceased publication after nine years. Its editors were Dr Roger Booth, Lay Pastor at The Chapel in the Garden, Bridport, Dorset (until his retirement in 2009), and Dr Tim Powell, Treasurer of the Bath Unitarian Fellowship. More recently, The Christian Compass Trust, which oversaw the journal, was wound up as well.

After discussion, the Trustees decided to transfer the remaining funds – more than £400 – to the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA). The Trustees said they had concluded that the Objects of the UCA were ‘very close in sentiment to those of the Trust’. However, there was one caveat, that the funds should not be used ‘to further any sectarian interest within the UCA’. The UCA was happy to assure the Trustees that we had no intention of promoting any sectarian interest (which we understood in this context to refer to promoting an exclusively Unitarian Christology).

The Unitarian Christian Association is grateful to The Christian Compass Trust for its generosity, and pays tribute to *The Christian Compass* for keeping alive the broad ideas and ideals of Free Christianity, at a time when our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination had almost forgotten them. We in the UCA pledge that we will continue to advance the cause of both Unitarian Christianity and Free Christianity, within our denomination and in the wider Church Universal.

UU Christians find mystic paths

BOOK REVIEW: *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, edited by **Kathleen Rolenz**. (Skinner House Books, Boston, 2006). US \$14.00, p/b.

The first testimony in this collection is headed ‘A Bible-Thumping, Trinitarian, Charismatic, Born-Again Jesus Freak’. Its author, Rachel Nguyen, quickly assures us that she is also a life-long Unitarian Universalist in the United States.

These contemporary voices in Unitarian Universalism (UU) in America will certainly disorientate us if we are expecting conventional Unitarian Christianity, but then why should we be? The UU is, after all, a thoroughly diverse denomination today (and historically its ‘other half’ -- the Universalist Church -- was Trinitarian in theology anyway).

This first author, Rachel Nguyen, makes it clear that while she regards Jesus as her own personal saviour, she does not want to impose this belief on others – one of several reasons, she says, why she remains proudly UU. Her views are not unusual in this collection, several authors express beliefs in a divine Jesus, for example. There is clearly a new mood in UU Christianity. (And by the way, this is mainly why I am reviewing the book five years after publication(!); I confess I have only recently become aware of it.)

So, what’s brought this new mood about? Well, in the very last article, editor Kathleen Rolenz takes us back to the first UU Christian Fellowship ‘Revival’ in New Orleans in 1999, where ‘fresh winds were blowing’. She writes: “People were praying on their knees with their hands outstretched, or weeping or singing about Jesus with a passion not normally heard in a UU church. Some were prayed over by the ancient practice of laying on of hands, others chose to be baptized.” Kathleen Rolenz says what was new was the *devotional* quality of the worship. And each year since, UU Christians have held their Revivals as a celebration of this new spirit.

Several of these UU authors were raised ‘in the faith’ in the 1960s and 70s by atheist, politically-involved parents. This new generation has rebelled, and in the process has discovered the rich traditions of Christian spirituality. A few arrived there via Eastern mysticism. Scotty McLennan writes of turning to the East after he rejected his conventional Christian background; he spent a summer in India studying and meditating with a Hindu Brahmin priest. When the time came to leave, Scotty told the priest he now wanted to become a Hindu.

The Hindu priest responded: “No, no. You’ve missed the point of everything I have taught you. You’ve grown up as a Christian and you know a lot about that path. It’s the religion of your family and your culture. Go back and be the best Christian you can.”

Scotty protested that Christians believed that only Jesus could save humanity, but the response from the Hindu priest was once again simple: “Then go back and find a way to be an open, non-exclusive Christian.” And this was Scotty McLennan’s first step to finding Unitarian Universalism, and to becoming a minister.

Another UU minister, Victoria Weinstein, also borrows from the East, referring to Jesus as her 'avatar' (an *incarnated deity* in the Hindu religion). She describes herself as a mystic at heart: "I call myself a Christian because I am a disciple of Jesus Christ – not just Jesus-that-great-guy-and-teacher-with-the-long-hair-and-sandals, but Jesus the living avatar of the great God, and Jesus the Christ of Easter morning."

These essays are varied, some expressing more mainstream Unitarian Christian beliefs, others telling of mystical and devotional pathways. But all are challenging, even exhilarating. It's well worth reading. 'Christian Voices' can be ordered from the website of the UU publishers, Skinner House Books, in the United States, at: www.uua.org/skinner

Jim Corrigan

FORTHCOMING EVENT

Saturday 29th October, 2011:

Unitarian Christian Association Autumn Meeting and Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture.

Memorial Church (Unitarian), Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW.

Programme:

- 12 noon - Lunch (no charge, donations welcome. 1 pm – Worship.
- 2 pm - Lecture (talk) by a Christian Aid representative on the Partnership Scheme, which the UCA is committed to supporting for the coming three years in the West African nation of Sierra Leone.
- 3 pm – Tea and departures.

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

JOIN THE UCA!

Registered Charity No 101 777 1

CURRENT RATES:

Individual membership £12	Joint membership £18
Concessions £8	Congregational membership £40
Individual life membership £120	Joint life membership £180
Members in EU countries £15	Outside the EU £20

Cheques payable to the Unitarian Christian Association should be sent to Catherine Fozard, 20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 2LU.

For non-UCA members, annual subscriptions to The Herald cost £8 – and individual copies may be ordered too.

(The magazine currently comes out twice a year.)
Please contact Catherine Fozard at: cathy@fozard.com

Another UU minister, Victoria Weinstein, also borrows from the East, referring to Jesus as her 'avatar' (an *incarnated deity* in the Hindu religion). She describes herself as a mystic at heart: "I call myself a Christian because I am a disciple of Jesus Christ – not just Jesus-that-great-guy-and-teacher-with-the-long-hair-and-sandals, but Jesus the living avatar of the great God, and Jesus the Christ of Easter morning."

These essays are varied, some expressing more mainstream Unitarian Christian beliefs, others telling of mystical and devotional pathways. But all are challenging, even exhilarating. It's well worth reading. 'Christian Voices' can be ordered from the website of the UU publishers, Skinner House Books, in the United States, at: www.uua.org/skinner

Jim Corrigan

FORTHCOMING EVENT

Saturday 29th October, 2011:

Unitarian Christian Association Autumn Meeting and Lance Garrard Memorial Lecture.

Memorial Church (Unitarian), Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW.

Programme:

12 noon - Lunch (no charge, donations welcome. 1 pm – Worship.

2 pm - Lecture (talk) by a Christian Aid representative on the Partnership Scheme, which the UCA is committed to supporting for the coming three years in the West African nation of Sierra Leone.

3 pm – Tea and departures.

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

JOIN THE UCA!

Registered Charity No 101 777 1

CURRENT RATES:

Individual membership £12

Joint membership £18

Concessions £8

Congregational membership £40

Individual life membership £120

Joint life membership £180

Members in EU countries £15

Outside the EU £20

Cheques payable to the Unitarian Christian Association should be sent to Catherine Fozard, 20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 2LU.

For non-UCA members, annual subscriptions to The Herald cost £8 – and individual copies may be ordered too.

(The magazine currently comes out twice a year.)

Please contact Catherine Fozard at: cathy@fozard.com



The Rev Brian Cockroft (Honorary President)
51 Lakeview Manor, Newtownards, Co. Down. BT23 4US
Telephone 028 9180 0690 Email: tworevs@hotmail.co.uk

UCA OFFICER GROUP

The Rev Jeffrey Lane Gould (Moderator)
Flat 6, Lincoln Court, Station Road, Padiham, Burnley, Lancashire BB12 8EN.
Telephone: 01282 789742 Email: jeffreylanegould@btinternet.com

Denise Birks (Secretary)
28 Sunningdale Close, Winsford CW7 2LD.
Telephone: 01606 558424 Email: denisegraham@talktalk.net

**Catherine Fozard
(Treasurer and Membership Secretary)**
20 Handforth Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 2LU
Telephone: 01625 533110 Email: cathy@fozard.com

The Rev Alex Bradley (Chaplain)
70 Springwood Avenue, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 8JA
Telephone: 01565 754465 Email: alexknutsford@yahoo.co.uk

The Rev Jean Bradley (Retreats Officer)
70 Springwood Avenue, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 8JA
Telephone: 01565 754465 Email: Revjeanbradley@yahoo.com

The Rev Bob Pounder (Publications Officer)
27 Marne Avenue, Ashton-under-Lyne OL6 9DW,
Telephone: 0161 339 6740 Email: bob.pounder@tesco.net

Jim Corrigall (Herald Editor)
80 Holly Park Road, Friern Barnet, London N11 3HB.
Telephone: 020 8361 1843 Email: jim@corrigall.myzen.co.uk