

B r i e f i n g

Free to Believe



Spring 2013

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FOOTSTEPS

Journeys of various kinds feature in this issue. There are also a couple of articles which are explicitly about having a foot in two camps - and perhaps others that suggest dual allegiance without actually stating it 'out loud'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks to Gunilla Norris for the illustration-with-words on page 1, to David Hayward for the drawing on page 4, to Debbie Heath for the photograph of Mark Townsend on page 6, and to the British Humanist Association for the logo on page 20.

What is a liberal-radical Christian? I would probably say: Someone rooted in the Christian tradition, but open to the future - someone thoughtful, unafraid to doubt and question; someone trying to put together a way of living that blends integrity of mind with Christ-like ethical and social action.

Something is left out of this picture, and may possibly be left out of the experience and practice of real-life liberals. This is the life of the soul – the nurturing of that shy bird who shuns search-lights and sudden movement, and loves to soar and ride the thermals. The life of the soul



is rather different (though certainly not divorced) from the life of the mind and from compassionate engagement with the world. Whereas the liberal mind might like to demythologize, analyze and render transparent, the soul is nourished by mystery

and a certain subdued lighting. It respects fragility, it appreciates the beauty of story and paradox, it loves that disappearing point where things can't altogether be *explained*, rationally and scientifically.

If you can be reduced to tears by music; or can come out of an art gallery and feel that you're seeing the world with new eyes; or can sense a shiver down your spine as you hear a poem and know that it speaks for something deep inside yourself; or can suddenly find that you are drawn into a profound sense of oneness with a flower, a waterfall, an animal, a fellow human being, then you know what I am saying. You may feel a yearning to spend more time with, or devote more energy to, this aspect of yourself that I am calling 'soul'.

Perhaps you nurture your soul with the practice of meditation, with mindfulness, with prayer. Perhaps with a senses-aware walk in the woods or by the sea. Perhaps your mind is so active and your diary so full that you rarely have any time at all to give to growing your soul, or allowing it to grow you.

So Free to Believe – well known for its excellent reading parties and stimulating conferences (food for the mind) - has a new invitation to offer you: a three day retreat in Glastonbury, during which we'll explore our personal *journeys to the centre*, the inward path to the 'still point' (food for the soul), which fuels all our outward endeavours.

We'll be staying at Abbey House - with its well-stocked library and free access to the gardens and ancient ruins. Suggestions as to how to open up the imagination for spiritual discoveries and creativity will be offered by Kate Compston and Peter Varney. This retreat will offer an introduction to stilling the mind and heart, particularly tailored to those who may not have ventured on any kind of quiet day or retreat before. This of course does not preclude from coming those who *do* have such experience! This brief time together will have a more liberal flavour than is perhaps encountered on traditional Christian retreats. There will be certain times when we do not converse in the ordinary way (though you will find that communication might well take place on a deeper level.)

The retreat starts at 4.00 p.m. on September 24th and ends after lunch on the 26th. This year we have booked 15 places. If you would like to join us please send a deposit of £25 (full cost £175.00) to Tim Richards at Orchard View, Townsend, Curry Rivel, Langport, Somerset, TA10 OHT as soon as possible to reserve a place (cheques made out to Free to Believe). If you would like to know more, the co-leaders will welcome an email.

Numbers have been kept deliberately low because the intimacy of the group is important to the working of the retreat. We have given Free to Believe first choice but if there should be any places still free at Easter we shall offer it more widely.

Further information from: kate.compston@googlemail.com and varney@waitrose.com.

I am always happy to receive *Briefing*. The following is not meant as a reproof, but is a plea.

Just as in the rest of the Church, there is still a tendency to accept the bad press given to the Pharisees by the New Testament without exercising the same critical skills that would be in use elsewhere, so it seems that it creeps in just as easily in our own ranks.

**A response to our
Autumn 2012
edition**

The Pharisees in many ways kept the spiritual elements of Judaism alive. Paul's words that the letter kills, the Spirit gives life, would have been echoed by many a Pharisee. Like so many movements, they were not monolithic. There was a more severe, even extreme element in those who followed Rabbi Shammai, whereas those in the camp of Rabbi Hillel were far more liberal. It was Hillel who summarized Judaism in "Do not do to others what you would not like done to yourself. All the rest is commentary." Even in later Rabbinic Judaism, the use of a form of case law took what for many outsiders looked like immutable regulations and adapted them into workable conditions. If sometimes the arguments seemed like casuistry, then the Church was no stranger to that itself.

In addition, even in the Gospel accounts, there are sympathetic Pharisees mentioned.

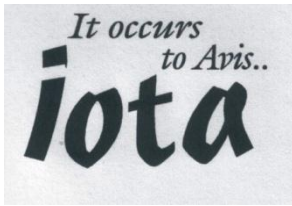
In all religions there are those who prefer to stick rigidly to a party line. We are aware of such groups in our own denominations. We also learn to look for the good among those with whom we have differences. Open dialogue with people tied to doctrinal statements is seldom easy, but it can be done. I have needed to do it because of my own Jewish background, since so many of my fellow Jewish

Christians/Messianic Jews have come via the conservative evangelical missions, and were the only group where I found some understanding of what it is like to be a Jew who follows the Jesus Way. Sometimes the dialogue fails, sometimes they hear something that strikes a chord but in different language. As Chris Avis said in the last “Briefing”, it can be about semantics – in my case perhaps even Semitic Semantics!

These days I am so much into the Free to Believe ethos. I would hate to feel that because of a possibly unconscious prejudice, uncritical comments about Pharisees (or other groups who may not have been adequately studied) might lead people to think that we are ourselves to be seen in as negative a way.



*Used with the kind permission of artist, David Hayward.
(www.nakedpastor.com)*



The Naked Truth

Chris Avis

Recently I attended a recital in a local church performed by two very accomplished musicians as soloists and together. I enjoyed some of the items but had great difficulty appreciating much of the contemporary content of the programme which seemed void of appealing melody or structure.

I do not play an instrument, though I enjoy singing (if it can so be called) and can just about follow a simple score. I think my musical taste is quite eclectic, but that church recital left me musically frustrated, unsatisfied and wondering how many others in the audience were feeling the same. One of the composers was also present, so my feelings remained unexpressed at the time (I was glad he didn't ask for my comments!).

Perhaps the reason I do not appreciate that kind of music is because of my ignorance of the theory behind it: all I need for rapturous enjoyment is a suitable qualification in Music Theory. Well, maybe.

When the emperor donned his non-existent new clothes, which only a fool could not see, he and his subjects were prepared to deny the evidence of their own eyes until an innocent child showed them just how foolish they really were. The moral of that perceptive tale hovers today, whether in music, art, literature or faith traditions, including Christianity. For some 'believers', an anxious desire not to appear foolish, to be excluded or implicitly made to feel guilty, can blind intellectual 'eyes' to the truths at the heart of a religion and lead, outwardly at least, to confirmation of the religious clothing of creedal statements.

It occurs to me that Isaiah 11:6, 'A little child shall lead them', may have a deeper message for us than the literalized misinterpretation of that statement as a soothsayer's nativity prediction. Among declining church memberships there are surely significant numbers of pew dwellers uneasy with some aspects of traditional worship, each longing to stand up metaphorically as a child of God and shout, "But Jesus isn't wearing these clothes!"

Mark Townsend is a Christian priest, formerly of the Church of England, now of the Open Episcopalian Church; he's also a member of the Bards, Ovates and Druids. He is a member of the Magic Circle, and the author of half a dozen books, the best known of which are "The Gospel of Falling Down" and "Jesus Through Pagan Eyes". In the autumn, he led a weekend workshop for Christians and Pagans on the theme of the latter book, at the Othona Community, Burton Bradstock.. It was at this event that he kindly consented to be interviewed.



Kate: Mark, in your book, *Jesus Through Pagan Eyes*, you say, “Progressive and liberal Christian groups are the main reason why I do not feel it necessary to remove my remaining foot from the church world”, and then you go on to speak warmly of Spong, Borg, Crossan, Churcher and so on; I’m wondering if you feel that only progressive and liberal Christians would be open-minded enough to entertain a relationship with paganism?

Mark: No, Christians other than liberal-progressives are very willing to have dialogue. I’ve recently come across some really interesting American evangelical college tutors and professors, who are doing lots of work with pagans in terms of dialogue; and in a way it sometimes it comes across as a more honest, dynamic debate.

That's because those Christians are more convinced about their own position. Now I'm pointing at myself and saying, "Ha-ha, you can come across as very woolly sometimes."

When I said that progressives and liberals keep me in the church, it's that - after I'd been booted out of the Anglican Church - I found it so lonely and isolating and terrifying, really, for the first couple of years - to be out of a world to which I'd given 25 years of my life; and it took a while to find Christians who were willing to be publicly associated with me. And those were people like John Churcher ...

Kate: Would you be prepared to say a little bit about this coming out of the Anglican Church ...?

Mark: Yeah. It happened in two stages: the first stage was five years ago, when I went - it's all set out in one of my books - to my bishop to come clean about a failing in the past and tell him how sorry I was; and to cut a long story short he told me to resign. I'd had this slightly naïve view that the church was forgiving! So for a few years I was kind of ostracized from the church, and then gradually, I was given the green light to come back in, in the form of a PTO, which is Permission to Officiate - and I couldn't receive that; I couldn't say yes to that invitation because, by then, I'd learned so much that was too outside the box ... the gay blessings that I was doing, which are so important because so few people are allowed or willing, to do them ... I'd done some beautiful rituals ... for instance, for two women, one of whom was Roman Catholic, and she'd been refused communion for twelve years, and she wanted it badly, so I gave her communion on her wedding day ... I'm horrified by those stories, when you come across them, of how the church can punish people just for *being people* - and I didn't want to be part of that, really. And the other issue was the pagan one: the Church of England does have a very disparaging official view of paganism, and until it changes that, I'm not interested in being part of something where I can't express those two sides, the Christian and the pagan sides, in me.

Kate: And you finally went to the Open Episcopal Church?

Mark: Yes. I thought: Now where am I? I could go it alone, just be Mark, the ex-priest, and offer myself to people to construct ceremonies and so forth. But I didn't feel comfortable. The Open Episcopal Church was closest to the Anglican tradition, and it was very happy to allow me to bring everything about myself within it. I had a re-ordination ceremony – and included within the liturgy were an Archbishop, a Druid Chief, a Goddess High-priestess, a Canadian Wiccan, and many more – all of whom had a role in making me this new kind of eclectic priest, which was totally mind-blowing ...

Kate: D'you think that offers a signpost to the future?

Mark: Maybe.



Often used as a pagan symbol, but universal in significance, is the Awen, a word which, in Middle Welsh, means (poetic) inspiration. Depicted are three bars representing Supreme Being pronouncing primal sound and light to create the universe.

Kate: It seems to me from the discussions we've been having that paganism is every bit as various as the church – it's 'multi-denominational' ... I wonder if you find that there are some emphases that are closer to your Christian understanding of Jesus? And are there some that are incompatible with it?

Mark: I would see all of paganism as opposed to a *traditional* view of Jesus – but I don't have that view of Jesus, myself ... I believe that Jesus is both historical and mythic, and neither of those aspects really contradicts any other religion, let alone paganism. But if you see Jesus as, literally, a blood-sacrificial saviour – the *only* way – then paganism would disagree.

When it comes to the spirit of deity, to God, even though I'm a member of the Bards, Ovates and Druids, I warm more to the Wiccan view of god and goddess, because there tends to be much more tenderness there. Many Wiccans have a very warm view of a goddess who unconditionally loves us. And I don't find so much of

that in Druidry. And it's not a criticism of it: it's just that the gods tend to be forces of nature ... But I don't find this kind of huge loving Source that's so important to me. That's another reason I've remained part of the Christian world.

Kate: What would you say are the two or three most important things that those with a Christian faith could learn from paganism?

Mark: In no particular order:- The celebration and reality of the divine feminine. In Christianity, it's still very hard to find. It's personified usually by Mary, not a very healthy view of femininity anyway – Mary the virgin mother ... it's beautiful, but it's only scratching the surface. Then there's the powerful and life-changing use of ritual and decent ceremony ... ritual that actually *does* something to you, and totally transforms you and makes sense in an authentic and dynamic way. And then - the idea that everything is divine, that somehow there is deity within everything and everyone, and therefore there's an intrinsic respect for everything and everyone, and a desire to cherish what usually we pillage and rape.

Kate: One of the things that occurs to me is that liberal Christianity tends to be very much in the head ... it's very much about ideas – and paganism, along with the Celtic approach to Christianity, sends us back into our bodies, it celebrates our physical ...

Mark: It's more sensual, more experience-based, but it's also very intellectually rigorous. Druids are very clued up about their own history. They're not shaken when Christians say "Ah-ha, your religion is a mish-mash of this, that and the other"... because their scholars are very clued up about how it all developed, and what was taken from where. But it does express itself, like you said, in a bodily, sensing, experiential way. The thing is that, generally speaking, in this country, liberal Christianity is liberal *protestant*. Whereas to me, most of the liberal Christian books that I have, and people I know, are *Roman Catholic* – and Roman Catholic liberal Christianity is not head-based. It's very mystical, very much more experience-based, and much more dynamic. Matthew Fox, yep - and Richard Rohr. And the list goes on ..

Kate: As you've demonstrated to us, you are a professional magician. Would you say something about the difference between performance magic and real magic.

Mark: By real magic, do you mean ritual magic? Do you mean that magic that causes change? Okay, I'm interested in that form of magic, but I'm quite nervous of the power of it. I appreciate the Druid reluctance to speak about that type of magic. I think, if there is such a thing, then I want to fully understand it before I even begin to practise it. That sense of magic I can't really speak to. But what I *can* say is that there is real magic, right now, right under our feet, happening in this room; there's magic which my illusionary magic evokes and awakens. So what I do when I do a stage show, even if it's in a very secular environment, either on a stage, or in a restaurant or wherever, I usually create effects and patter and routines that I hope awaken people's appreciation of natural magic.



Magic doesn't just mean spells, and it doesn't just mean illusions, it means the rainbow, it means looking out at an ocean, looking to the stars, and it means those connections that we know are there, and that we miss when we grow up, 'cos when we were children, life was so much more

magical, and occasionally we stumble across it all again, and we think, we gasp, because something that feels miraculous has happened. But I don't want to think you can manipulate and control nature ... and again that's why I'm kind of nervous of ritual magic because I think you're trying to control things. ... There's a difference between the viewpoint that says: 'This is reality, we can change it', and the viewpoint that says: 'This is the reality that *is* magic. Don't try to change reality, try to change yourself, that's the magic.' Does that makes sense?

Kate: Yes, yes, it does. Thank you very much indeed, Mark.

“On the night before he died, Jesus took bread “ - and Christians have been arguing about it ever since. Which is strange because Jesus used mealtimes as a demonstration of a new world order, what he called the Kingdom of God. For Jesus, mealtimes were inclusive and non-hierarchical, an indication of an abundance for all and a challenge to the received wisdom of his time.

So why should our understanding of what was happening at the Last Supper be any different? Yet we have made it among the most divisive of all the things we do as Church. We see meal tables as an opportunity to build community, yet our communion tables tend to fragment it. We hedge communion tables round with restrictions, not least who may eat at the table and especially who may preside at it.

For a number of years I have been growing increasingly unhappy with the traditional words of distribution: “the body of Christ; the blood of Christ” so, for a time, I avoided the problem when presiding by saying “the body of Christ was broken for you” and “the blood of Christ was shed for you.” But now even this revision is not enough, because these words still seem to suggest that body and blood were in some way necessary to put right the relationships between humanity and God that Jesus had to die because God could be satisfied in no other way.

I no longer believe this. I believe that Jesus died because his vision of how the world might be, his vision of the Kingdom of God, was seen as a threat, by the powers-that-be, to the status quo; and he had to be silenced. If this is the case, then how are we to understand Communion?

For me, part of the answer came from looking at the various names that are used.

The Lord's Supper – an acknowledgement of whose meal this is.

Communion – that this is something we do together, you do not celebrate on your own.

The Eucharist – from the Greek word for thanksgiving.

The Mass – I was unsure about this, but discovered that it may well come from the words used by Catholic priests at the end of the old Latin rite: “*Ite missa est*” – “Go, you are dismissed.” It provides a connection between what we do inside church and what we do outside.

It is perhaps ironic - or maybe an indication of God's sense of humour - that this Catholic idea now resonates so strongly with me, a liberal/radical minister in the Reformed tradition. It led me to wonder about the idea of Communion as a subversive act, as an act of defiance.

The Vision of the Kingdom

At the Last Supper in that Upper Room, maybe Jesus was offering a way for his vision of the Kingdom of God to be kept alive. If the words reported are anywhere near to being the ones Jesus said, then perhaps when he said, “Do this to remember me” he meant something along the lines of:

“You may not believe it but the powers-that-be are going to kill me tomorrow. I've upset too many powerful people for it to be any other way. This is how easily my body will be broken; this is how easily my blood will be spilt. But you know the vision I have, the vision of a world where God's kingdom holds sway. And I want you to hang on to this vision and to tell other people about this vision and to go on working to make this vision a reality. So every time you sit down to eat together, when you break bread to hand round to each other, when you pour wine for each other, remember me. Remember me, let me be the unseen guest at the table, let what I was about, what I *am* about, still inspire you. Let my vision be your vision.”

So for these first followers of Jesus, perhaps breaking bread and pouring wine became a subversive, defiant act – the mealtime equivalent of drawing a fish in the sand. We call it a mystery. We talk about transubstantiation, consubstantiation, the real presence, and so on. But I find all that very difficult and perplexing.

I can no longer use traditional words when I'm presiding at a Communion service in the United Reformed Church. At the breaking of bread I use the words:



“This represents my body – broken in solidarity with the suffering of the world.”

“This cup is about a new community – with God, with each other, and with the world.”

At the sharing (assuming the general URC practice of eating and drinking together):

“The bread of life – symbol of abundance for all.”

“The poured out wine – symbol of sacrificial living.”

Why? Because I believe that Jesus entrusts us with that same vision of an alternative reality. Communion as a subversive act is a small beginning of a commitment to his vision of how the world might be.

If you are able to consider making a regular donation to the work of Free to Believe, you will find a Standing Order form on p. 23. This will help the network to budget for conferences, reading parties, retreats and publications.

A review of Mark T B Laing, *From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission*. Pickwick Publications, Oregon, 2012. ISBN 978-1-61097-424-0

Although originally a Ph.D. thesis for Edinburgh University, the story told here by Mark Laing held my interest as it described the theological and ecclesiological issues addressed by Lesslie Newbigin, well known in URC circles for his work at Selly Oak and as Moderator. Was Newbigin the most important theologian of mission in the English speaking world of the 20th century, as Andrew Walls suggests in his foreword? The URC has been very proud of Newbigin but, 15 years after his death, the time for some critique may have arrived. There will be parts of Newbigin's legacy, when he challenged church order and engaged with secularization, which FTB people have affirmed. If we have felt alienated by much of the theology of 'church' and 'mission' this book offers a more holistic understanding. It focuses on how Newbigin's theology evolved, as a result of his experience as a missionary and bishop in South India, his work with the ecumenical organizations at Geneva, and finally as a theologian and pastor in England.

Newbigin began service as a Church of Scotland missionary in India at a time when, Laing suggests, missions were paternalistic, voluntary activities, with inadequate theological foundation. The mission agencies created what still remain as outposts of the Church of Scotland or, in Borneo, 'SPG Christians', taking their name from the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. As Newbigin engaged in forming the new Church of South India (CSI), he recognized three ways in which the church's members are incorporated in Christ:- by hearing and believing the gospel, by sacramental participation in the life of the church, and by receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit.

Laing describes Newbiggin's disappointment that the Anglican Lambeth Conferences, and some of their mission agencies, rejected his understanding and refused recognition of the CSI because of its emphasis on local rather than universal ecclesiology.

From 1959, as secretary of the International Missionary Council, Newbiggin moved from examining the structure to the substance of mission. Laing's book focuses on Newbiggin's contribution to the integration of the IMC with the WCC, and the subsequent evolution of his missiology. His vision was for multi-lateral experiments in mission, and cross-fertilization of ideas. Newbiggin did critique Presbyterian order, and suggested alternatives, but Laing notes that little was written about catholic approaches to mission. The Anglican, Lutheran and Catholic approach of establishing missionary dioceses, with a bishop rather than a local congregation as focus, was not explored. The Anglican pattern, with partner dioceses across the world, has proved to give rich cross-cultural experience.

Newbiggin returned to India in 1965 as Bishop of Madras. Laing discerns how Newbiggin welcomed globalization and secularization as historical processes, and asserted the value of science and technology. His approach became historical-eschatological rather than salvation-historical. He saw secularization as bringing discrete histories into a single unified history, a world civilization, in which all would find Christ as their Redeemer. However after his return to the UK in 1974, to work as a lecturer at the Selly Oak Colleges and as a URC minister, Newbiggin – as Laing shows - recognized that secularization brought disintegration and might end in totalitarianism.

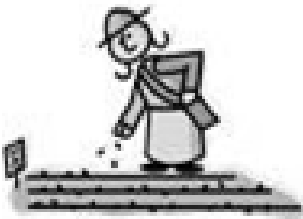
Many were profoundly touched by encounters with Newbiggin during his time at Selly Oak, and this book shows how he challenged our thinking and adventurously explored the world of theology.

Footnote: Peter Varney, a new member of the FTB committee, is an Anglican priest and Quaker, and has a particular interest in the way Christianity has encountered traditional religion in Sarawak, Malaysia. His book, Iban Anglicans: the Anglican Mission in Sarawak from, 1848-1968 is to be published in 2013. He is a research associate in the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, and would welcome readers' responses to this review: p8rvarney@aol.com

Unitarian Universalism – Faith of the Free

Carol Williams

I have been going to a Unitarian church in Islington N1 for the past 18 months. While most Unitarian churches in this country style themselves as 'free Christian' in ethos, New Unity is Universalist, which means that it is radically inclusive, accepting of everyone, no matter what they believe or don't. A person like myself who has lost faith in God, or who never really was able to have it in the first place, fits very nicely in this spiritual but not religious community, where we are genuinely free to believe and are encouraged to be open minded and open hearted.



Guidance for living is given, based on a set of practices called 'The 5 Seeds of Wholeness': Mindfulness, Compassion, Connection, Generosity and Gratitude. In basing our daily interactions with the world on these, we grow in spiritual stature ('wholeness').

I have realized, since being a member of New Unity, that for many years after I left the Church, I was adrift spiritually, but not aware that I was. Now I've come to see the enormous value of these kinds of communities, for teaching us how to pick our way through the morally challenging maze of living in the world. I receive inner resources for dealing with all that I encounter, and insights which are enormously valuable to me in struggling with my own negative reactions to people and situations. I realize the truth that, in living as if I truly loved the world, I release in myself a powerful feeling of connectedness to all that is and an appreciation of the small things that often go unnoticed. This latter is a source of joy, and capable of transforming my attitudes to everyone and everything.

New Unity was responsible for getting me onto Facebook and Twitter. Without the incentive of wanting to engage with members, outside of Sundays, I would never have signed up to either!

I have discovered a whole world of wonderful people via these media and have connected to many other Unitarians, both here and in the USA, and joined many groups for the online discussion and sharing of many issues.

In my attempts to live by practising greater compassion I have recently encountered the challenge of veganism and find myself increasingly persuaded that the violence towards other species that we seem to accept without question each time we buy milk or meat, is unacceptable to a heart of love. I have been challenged to answer, for myself, the question, 'how can I call myself truly spiritual whilst supporting violence, abuse and cruelty to other beings?' My conclusion is, that I cannot. If I have no compassion for dumb beasts, I am not a person who can claim to be living in the spirit of love. St Francis was right. Other animals are also our brothers and sisters.

One of our Unitarian songs begins this way "Our world is one world, what touches one affects us all" and this sears my soul. There is compelling evidence that intensive farming of animals is bad for the environment, and unsustainable, and I am concerned that only 25% of humans are rich enough to eat regular meals. It is estimated that we could feed all the world easily if we stopped using land for farming animals and growing their feed, and used it for crops for people instead. Pollution of ground water and air has effects far beyond the place where they begin. Our world is one world indeed. And it is a fragile one in many respects, groaning under human assault on its life support systems.

Fasting and prayer have long been religious disciplines. I feel that veganism is a sort of fast. It connects me to compassion and makes me mindful of what I put in my mouth. It reminds me of those who must endure without any food and encourages me to be frugal in my eating habits. It is, therefore, good for the soul. And many also say, for the body, since animal fat and protein, consumed in the amounts that Western diets facilitate, is bad for us.

Prayer is not something I do, in the way that Christians tend to, as I have no belief in God's existence, but the way I try to live is a prayer for a kinder world. I take on board the Unitarian concept of being the change I want to see in the world. It is how we live that matters the most - that is the Unitarian belief.

The Journey of our Lives

Sue Liddell has been reading and reflecting

I love to read about how other people live their lives, pursue their journeys, approach the pilgrimage of existence, via both biography and fiction. What do these accounts or stories tell me about life here on earth, especially as it connects with my faith in Jesus Christ and my reading of the gospels?

I would like to tell you about three of the many books I have read recently. I am not going to comment on their literary value – some of them are not that well written – but they each gave me pause for thought.



Annabel, by Kathleen Winter, set in Canada, tells the journey of a young person who is born with dual gender and whose journey through to adulthood is marked by the expectations and wishes of father and mother; by the attentions and procedures of the medical profession; by the wariness and occasional hostility of peers. The outcome is satisfactory as Annabel/Wayne becomes a university student in an

environment where what you wear and how you look is quite fluid and laid back. But there is still the question about how that life will continue later on.

As with the shorter ending of the gospel of Mark, the reader is left to work out or envisage how that life should continue. Mark has Jesus drop hints about eternal life, salvation, the kingdom, but finishes his account with a group of frightened women and a general message - that through the disciples 'the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation' was sent out. In the light of your own faith and experience, how would you end Mark's gospel?

To the End of the Land, by David Grossman, set in Israel, deals with people in a conflict-ridden land whose personal relationships are coloured by having their loyalties and actions seen as supporting a regime with which they are not always comfortable. For one mother, that regime means constant worry that her sons may be killed; and her friendship with one of the 'enemy' is a cause for concern. It is a regime that has irretrievably damaged the life of one of the male characters, both physically and mentally, and has caused the other male to become focused on living for the present.

The book is a very complex and detailed work, but as an account of the journey of three lives – two male and one female – it provoked in me thoughts about the life of Jesus, seen by all gospel writers as a man caught up by the tensions of a conflict-ridden land. His personal relationships – with family, friends, and the authorities – are guided by his overarching relationship with his Father, his God; but without that faith, his life would have been as desolate and melancholy as those in the novel. However, how would we respond to a friend's recent remark: 'faith is fine for those who need it, but most of us don't'?

Hotel Iris, by Yoko Ogawa, set in Japan, is one of the most remarkable books I have ever read. It is the story of a young girl who enters into a relationship with a much older man; a relationship where sexual pleasure for both is gained through much pain and torture – a situation to which both consent and for which both seek. As I read, part of me felt uncomfortable with such a relationship; and that led me to wonder about how we, as Christians, deal with the accounts of Christ's suffering and death. We are given quite graphic pictures of Christ's pain but we can be tempted to set this within the future rosy picture of the resurrection, thus seeing the pain and pleasure as inter-linked and inter-dependent. Does this give us a picture of a world where pleasure is only to be gained through pain?

Where are we going in our Christian lives? On a journey where we are not sure of the ending? Or a journey where our faith is a prop to keep us from desolation? Or a journey where all our joy is based on pain and suffering? The choice is ours; we are independent individuals, able to read and reflect, and use our reflections to guide us into truth.



Perhaps rather surprisingly, as a committed member of Free To Believe, I am also a member of the British Humanist Association, feeling that to be a Christian is to be at one and the same time to be a humanist, and that this is, in fact, what the doctrine central to Christianity, the Incarnation, is all about.

Undoubtedly, the term humanism has come to mean atheism and antagonism to the Christian faith, and, it is true that many describing themselves as humanists are also anti-religious and anti-Christian. But, as the Christian humanist movement aims to establish, there must be a strong element of humanism in every expression of Christianity, and some progressive thinkers are even suggesting that to be an atheist does not necessarily mean to be a non-Christian. Brian Mountford, in his book *Christian Atheist*, has made out a good case for this position.

The BHA makes its unique contribution to the debate which ensues every time the church makes some statement affirming its resistance to society's steady evolution in moral awareness, the most recent of which is its opposition to women bishops and gay marriage. Because of its focus, it often takes the lead in protest, exposing the prejudice which informs the resistance, and on occasion taking meaningful action. So, when the Christian fundamentalists advertised on London buses, it countered by doing the same.



The latest BHA initiative is a continuation of its contribution to the quality of education in our schools by ensuring that children and young people receive unbiased information facilitating their healthy development into well-balanced and useful citizens. The BHA rightly and necessarily aims to identify the negative and potentially harmful bias of the church's involvement in the education process through faith schools, many of which not only stress the unscientific tenets of creationism, but have also tended to support a subsidiary role for women and a denial of the essential complexity of our sexuality. This causes much suffering. This latest initiative is the launching of a campaign to place a book, *The Young Atheist's Handbook* by Alom Shaha, in every school library.

From a traditional Muslim household

Knowing that the BHA was guided by highly esteemed, scholarly and perceptive people, I was curious to know what was so good about this book. I read it and was impressed that, not only were its arguments cogently expressed, but it was written by someone uniquely qualified to guide young people through the moral maze they have to encounter in the modern world. Alom Shaha was brought up in a traditional Moslem household and, unusually, resisted the conditioning which takes place, eventually becoming an avowed atheist. That he was able to do this while living on a sink-estate in East London, subjected to extreme racial abuse by a large minority of the predominant white population, makes for a good story. At the same time it deals with the basic issues of identity development, sexuality and the need for a balanced understanding of religion, particularly the Christian and Moslem brands.

It is a book which will offend many orthodox Christians, but it should not do so. While it is uncompromising in stating the prejudices and past and present damaging actions of church and mosque, it also covers the positive aspects of faith. Significantly, it deals not only with the damaging and human-diminishing aspects of particular themes of belief, but also with the conditioning which has affected many that belief itself is good and unbelief is bad.

As Shaha writes: “Belief in belief is a powerful meme”. The 2011 census has shown us, if we did not already know, that the overwhelming majority of people in this country no longer support the church or believe in its basic tenets, but there is evidence that most see belief itself as a good thing, and non belief, or atheism, as somehow bad. As Mountford makes clear in his book, if we are looking for a Christianity which is consistent with modern critical scholarship and consistent with basic rationality, then we need to get beyond being hung up on the hook of belief. Strangely, unbelieving can be the key towards a radical Christianity which engages much more exactly with modern perception and awareness.

Endpiece

Ian Gregory

Ann was 54 when she died. Her life had been marked by disappointments. She had worked for the housing department of a large local authority, but when the housing stock was sold off, she was made redundant. She got married but her husband left her. Married again, her new husband died of cancer. Ann was diagnosed with the same condition herself, and it finally killed her. Ann had carried out valuable voluntary work, but eventually the illness confined her to her flat, with good books, radio 4, and her cat.

She was not a churchgoer. I was asked to take her funeral, and was led to say this: *Ann was not a religious person, thank God. It would have been an unnecessary complication to try and account for the events of her life, and particularly the scourge of cancer, in a religious context. There are some stories that cannot easily be squared with traditional religious belief. It is much better to allow events to flow with courage, dignity and humour. God doesn't have to be named, let alone understood. I was thinking about her life this morning as I came downstairs, and I saw a moth trapped inside a landing window. It was struggling to find a way out, and might well have been thinking, 'What am I doing here? Why have things gone so wrong so early in my life, just as I had learned to fly?' I opened the window, and it was free. God has opened the window for Ann. She is free.*

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Details of books considered or reviewed in this edition:

Laing, Mark T. B., *From Crisis to Creation: Lesslie Newbigin and the Reinvention of Christian Mission*, 2012, Pickwick Publications

Grossman, David, *To the End of the Land*, 2011, Vintage

Mountford, Brian, *Christian Atheist*, 2011, O Books

Ogawa, Yoko, *Hotel Iris*, 2011, Vintage

Shaha, Alom, *The Young Atheist's Handbook*, 2012, Biteback Publishing

Townsend, Mark, *Jesus Through Pagan Eyes*, 2012, Llewellyn Worldwide

Townsend, Mark, *The Gospel of Falling Down*, 2007, O Books

Winter, Kathleen, *Annabel*, 2012, Vintage

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*Particularly sought are brief half-page accounts of what
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