

# For this Life

## A Unitarian View

Carol Palfrey says that Unitarians are more concerned with behaviour than doctrine and life on Earth rather than an afterlife.

Richard Holloway is fond of recounting the story of Paul Gauguin who, in 1896, on hearing that his daughter Aline had died of pneumonia back in Holland responded by painting an enormous canvas about the riddle of life. In the top left hand corner he slashed three questions: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' As Holloway points out, these are not only Gauguin's questions, they are our questions. And in its search for answers humanity set out on its religious quest and created its religious stories based on the expectation that the answers would come from outside or beyond.

But now that we have 'taken leave of God' and abandoned the quest for supernatural answers, perhaps it is time to change the questions. In a universe where there is no divinely inspired purpose to life, or eternal reward for virtue, what questions might we now ask? On his website Don Cupitt says that he seems to have ended up trying to make the philosophy of life into a respectable subject. 'Life', he says, 'is the whole human world, everything as it looks to and is experienced by the only beings who actually consciously have a world, namely human beings with a life to live.'

I would suggest that the most important religious question for our times is one which has always been at the heart of religion and

philosophy and that is: 'How should we live?' In this article I offer some personal thoughts on a role for SOF Network in helping us find our answers to this question.

After many years in the convent, Karen Armstrong found her answer through the serious study of the major religious traditions and

realised that religion is not about belief but about behaviour. At the heart of every one of the major world religions lies compassion: 'the ability to feel with the other, dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another person in that place. This is the Golden Rule first'

propounded by Confucius five centuries before Christ: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you".

When awarded the TED Prize in 2007 Armstrong chose to use it to create the Charter of Compassion as a call to restore the Golden Rule to the centre of religious and moral life. Listening to the recording of her acceptance speech to TED, I was surprised to hear her confess that, despite her intensely religious background, it was not until she was sent by the BBC to Jerusalem to make a film about early Christianity that she encountered the other Abrahamic religious traditions: Judaism and Islam. At this point in her life, Armstrong admits,



Norfolk contingent at the Unitarian General Assembly 2015

she knew very little about these faiths at all, having always seen Judaism as a prelude to Christianity and never having been exposed to the teachings of Islam. Her interest in Buddhism, on which she has written at length, came later.

In 2010, the SOF Network was accepted as partner in the Charter. Well before that the editorial statement, published on the contents page of every issue of *Sofia*, included the words that wisdom ‘can only be sought by humans at home on Earth, and is inseparable from human kindness’ – which is at the heart of compassion.

The SOF Network has always provided a forum for like-minded people, mostly with a religious background, to share their thoughts, doubts and experiences on all aspects of religion. In its early days it provided a ‘safe space’ for those involved in mainstream churches, both professionally and as lay members, who felt reluctant to express radical views and share their doubts, because of the possible consequences. Now that society as a whole is more open to radical views, and fewer people engage in any sort of ‘religious’ activity, some people have questioned whether there is still a role for the SOF Network. I believe that it still has an important role in providing a place where conversation and discussion can take place on important issues of ethical living and what it means to be fully human, particularly in the context of our multi-cultural society where misinterpretation of the great religious teaching has led to enmity, persecution and wars between rival factions. For Network members, all matters of religion are rooted in history, culture and language; this realisation goes hand-in-hand with a deep appreciation that religion is a tremendous human resource.

In her editorial in the September 2016 issue of *Sofia*, Dinah Livingstone wrote: ‘I think many, both old and young, in Britain today care very much about what is happening in our society and our world, but perhaps they don’t call that “religious”. It would be a shame if religion was wholly relegated to private life, as ‘spirituality’ or something, and lost the power to incorporate the treasures of wisdom and kindness buried in traditional stories that can enrich – save – our public life as well.’

While enjoying the intellectual challenge which the SOF Network provides, I personally find it

important to belong to some kind of church or religious community which is not just about what we do on a Sunday morning but how we live our lives. I feel fortunate to have found the Unitarians and a congregation in my local city. For me Unitarianism is the religious tradition which provides a perfect complement to the ethos of the Network and many SOF members are also Unitarians. Unitarianism does not offer answers to Life’s questions and problems but provides a community where tolerance and diversity are prized and in which members have the freedom to create their own meaning and purpose and decide for themselves what they want do with the time they have available on this planet.

The first question that visitors to our chapel ask is always, ‘What do Unitarians believe?’ because equating religion with belief is now hard-wired into popular culture. Many people are surprised to find that Unitarianism encompasses a wide variety of beliefs and there is no creed or doctrine that Unitarians must follow or believe. Unitarians acknowledge the movement’s roots in Christian tradition and some call themselves free or liberal Christians. Equally, many find it difficult to come to terms with Judeo-Christianity. Among Unitarians you will find people who have Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist, Buddhist, Pagan and Atheist perspectives. So the answer to the question about belief can only be a personal one. This inevitably leads to the next question: ‘If you have no central belief, what keeps you together?’ Perhaps the best way to answer is that Unitarians think respect for integrity is preferable to the pressure to conform, and that the final authority for your faith or philosophy of life lies within your own conscience.

The Unitarian Way is open minded and inclusive. Unitarians draw inspiration from many sources, including: the example and spiritual insights of others; writings deemed sacred by other religions; inherited traditions of critical and philosophical thought; the ongoing creative work of artists, musicians, writers and the scientific search for knowledge and understanding.

Although, for historical reasons, Unitarians do not attach importance to religious icons, in our Chapel at Norwich, as a symbol of our inclusive approach, we have a roundel (see picture) showing the religious symbols of all the major

faiths which serves as a reminder that there are many ways of finding meaning and purpose in life.

At last year's SOF Conference Denise Cush reviewed the trends in the changing religious landscape of Britain including the increase in those who described themselves as having no religion – the 'Nones'. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that people are identifying themselves as atheist or 'anti-religion', and the word 'spiritual' is increasingly used by people to describe an overall attitude to life which they find difficult to define without recourse to a term from religious vocabulary. Religious language, like poetry, seeks to express the inexpressible. Reflecting on his life as he entered retirement, one of our Unitarian Ministers said that, as the years went by, he found that his bookshelves were increasingly taken up by poetry rather than theology and it was to poetry that he turned when in need of inspiration or solace.

As Denise pointed out, the trend, especially among young people, has been a move away from formal religion towards a commitment to values. This is a very 'Unitarian' view. Believing in the inherent worth of every individual, Unitarians have always put social justice at the core of the Unitarian way of life. The vision of the 'Kingdom of God', seen as a global commonwealth of peace, justice and plenty for all, has always been important for Unitarians. It has inspired social and political involvement across a range of concerns including religious freedom, justice, equality and human rights.

Unitarians address the question of 'How shall I live?' in terms of shared values including the acceptance and nurture of life's spiritual dimension; the use of reason and honest doubt in the search for truth; mutual respect and goodwill in personal relations; tolerance and openness to the sincerely-held beliefs of others; peace, justice and democracy; and reverence for the Earth and whole natural system of which we are a part.

We find that these values form a more effective foundation for true community than insistence on uniformity of belief and doctrine



and place stress upon individual members interpreting these values and accepting personal responsibility for putting them into practice.

Unitarians, like members of the SOF Network, are very fond of words. As Don Cupitt has said, words shape the way that we think. When we discuss ideas we use words; when we think we use words. Words are the way that we express reality. One of the factors that first attracted me to the Unitarians was the theology expressed in the words of some of their hymns, which reflect many of my own views and feelings about life. We have a wide range of hymns and there are still many whose words I feel unable to sing 'with integrity'. However, when words are meaningful, there is something indescribably uplifting about singing together, irrespective of one's musical ability. Watching *Songs of Praise* and listening to people belting out the hymns with joyful abandon, I often wonder how many of them give any thought to the words they are singing.

These words by John Storey from *Hymns for Living*, based on the thoughts of the Dalai Lama, would seem to be a good anthem for the SOF Network:

Religion needs to permeate  
The common life of every day;  
Each to the other must relate  
To build the world for which we pray.

When thoughts are pure, and words are kind,  
Compassionate our every deed,  
With selfishness put from the mind  
Our lives become a worthy creed.

I would love to feel worthy to have for my epitaph two lines from a hymn by Alicia S. Carpenter (1930 – )

'When they ask what I did well,  
Tell them I said Yes to Life.'

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