



THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



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THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

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Inquiring Words...

‘One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of “not racist.” The claim of “not racist” neutrality is a mask for racism.’

Ibram X Kendi

Oblivious to my privilege

Thirty years ago I had been in my job as a reporter about a week. Stuck on the loo, I realised there was no paper in my cubicle. I managed without it. There wasn't any in all the other stalls. I thought I'd better tell someone.

I was intimidated by the gruff old men who ran the newsroom and too embarrassed to discuss ladies toilets with them. One senior editor was a woman, so I felt most comfortable telling her. I thought she, perhaps, had been in that situation, perhaps she'd be sympathetic. I told her what the situation was. She was a bit short with me – but everyone was a bit impatient with the new reporter. Years later, though, I found out the reason. Another colleague told me the editor – an African American woman – felt I'd been racist. I saw in her a woman who would understand my plight. But she saw in me a privileged white person who thought it was her job to restock the loos. She felt I had treated her like a janitor. By the time I learnt how she felt, she'd moved on to a well-deserved career at a national media outlet.

I have long been aware that I was raised in a society marinated in racism – from ‘jokes’ with race as the punchline, to media coverage which paints brown and black people as less accomplished or less worthy. That awareness created a responsibility to fight those prejudices. I was proud to work in a newsroom with African-American editors. I have always believed that diversity in positions of power – particularly in the media – is important. I felt terrible that I failed to see how an African-American would receive what I said. The instinct of most thinking people is to back away from any implication of racism. But I know now that it was my privilege that prevented me understanding her view.

I wish the editor could have talked to me about how she felt when I asked about the loo roll. I wish we had been in a situation or a relationship or a place where we could have learnt about each other. The world has changed since then, and more of those conversations are happening. They are still difficult, but we must seek them out and not back into our corners of comfort. It should not be the responsibility of oppressed people to teach their oppressors. But it is up to all of us born into the privilege of being oblivious to our own advantages to listen, to work towards change. For it is not enough to not be a racist – we must fight the inequality and prejudice around us.

In her cover story, the Rev Winnie Gordon asks her fellow Unitarians to embrace her life experience. Winnie showed tremendous courage offering it first as a talk at Hucklow Summer School and now, as an opportunity for all of us in the Unitarian movement to learn from. It will run in two parts – this issue and the next.

Let's start a those uncomfortable but essential conversations.

MC Burns

My race and society shape my belonging

We all wear masks. You might wear one for different people, different situations. How does it feel behind a mask? How about when you put the mask down? How would it feel if you could never take the mask off? How would you feel if you never had to wear the mask again?

Who I am – my identity – and what I like about me has been filtered, shaped and realised through the masks I wear. In exploring the colour of my skin and the makeup of my ethnicity I consider, what do I like about me?

I like my spirally hair – blond, black or red. I like it braided or twisted. I'm not that keen on being short, but my feet are just the right size. I like how my skin is brown all the time. I like my culture of Jamaica – white rum, rice and peas, breadfruit, curry mutton. But my favourite dish is fish and chips with vindaloo. I like my creative brain. Probably what I like best is the love and endurance my mother gave me. Becoming me has not been simple. The experience of my life, my world view, and my theology are filtered through the body I inhabit and the mask I wear. I have not always liked my body. A flabby belly, short legs, long arms, a big nose on an average face with a skin tone that was picked-on and portrayed negatively in the media. Then, to top it all off: girl parts. I struggled with the concept of bodily love. I wondered about that phrase in the bible 'made in God's image'. Was I made in God's image? Does God look like me?

A white man on a cloud or a cross

The images of the divine – a man on a cloud, white of skin, grey of beard, straight European hair – did not represent me. Neither did the fella on a cross, blue eyed, blond hair, tall, lean, *male*. In pictures, at school, in films, this is all I saw. What I was told to believe was shaped by a race – not

“Before that moment we were all the same. After, I was different.”

my own – and one that viewed me as other. For me, the theology of the body is not rooted in this God image sold to me as a child. I had to find another way of connecting. So I looked to identity.

Racism began at age 8

My body is the progeny of Jamaican immigrants who were also British subjects on arrival to this land. Their immigrant status defined their life chances, their work and living opportunities, and their hopes for their children. Yet I was not introduced to immigration or race until I was 8. I was standing in the school playground and my white friends called me the 'N-word'. They said I was *different* because my skin colour was not like theirs. It is my first memory of how race shaped my life. Before that moment we were all the same. After, I was different. My multi-cultural and multiracial background is wider than descending from Jamaica. My mother was mixed race, her father was Jamaican Irish. Her great-grandmother was Jewish and East Indian. There is also Chinese in the family, and traces of Arawak Indians – the first inhabitants of the island of Jamaica, long before conquests. On my father's side are Jamaica and Cuba. And somewhere down the line are his Scottish roots. Most importantly, my ancestry is rooted in and impacted by slavery on both sides. These multiple ethnic cultures

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We must be more inclusive

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shaped my world view and brought diversity to my faith, from earth-centred beliefs and ancestry spirituality, to the Obeah religion, Catholicism, plus Baptist and some Pentecostal. I was raised with bush-plant medicine. Dried up plants cured childhood illness. Live green leaves drew out headaches or fevers. Healing was a bodily function and a religious experience, delivered by god through people's hands.

Freedom is still defined by my race

This made me open to all religious possibilities, despite the perceived impossibility of the science behind them. Maybe you can understand why I ended up finding a home in Unitarianism.

I identify as Unitarian Universalist (UU) rather than simply Unitarian because there is something important about being universal in this world. I was drawn to UUism because of its liberalism and its liberation tradition of standing and fighting for the rights of the oppressed. But as I journey into my ministry, and into our Unitarian histories, I have come to understand that the liberalism I was drawn to was white and male. The beliefs of the enlightenment thinkers populate our history – the same white and male liberalism that often supported slavery. That liberalism continues to impact my black liberation. I cannot deny the uncomfortable paradox of a famous landmark standing on a street named for its slavery supporter. My freedom and autonomy are still defined by the narratives and restrictions imposed by the Empire 200 years ago – despite changing laws and times.

The best definition of racism I've heard is one by Pastor Carl Lentz. He says: 'the root of racism as ignorance, ignorance being a lack of information that creates insecurity, and insecurity creates defensiveness, and defensiveness creates attack'.

That racism is what shaped my world view. I have experienced racism without identifying the perpetrator as racist. And I have experienced a racist without racism. Strange, I know. But here is an example. While working in prisons, white supremacists came to me with their concerns. They identified as racists, but they did not spew racism at me. I want to share with you three experience I have had in our Unitarian community that influenced my need to explore ways of finding spiritual meaning in my bodily reality:

1) I remember first attending Unitarian congregations

and a few people described the Unitarian community. They reassured me that Unitarians 'weren't those happy-clappy people'.

2) I took my then-sister-in-law, a black Christian, to a Unitarian Universalist service. We sat behind a same-sex couple who held hands and leaned over and kissed each other occasionally. I felt at home in a community proudly displaying their inclusivity of LGBT and smiled a lot. My sister-in-law felt uncomfortable in a community openly allowing expression of LGBT love and never went back. (Although I would like everyone to feel included, the reality is that I would not compromise the priority for LGBT+ people to feel comfortable over those who are less comfortable around LGBT people.)

3) I had a conversation with a lifelong Unitarian. That person asked me how my parents felt on arriving in England and having to remove their grass skirts.

These experiences illustrate the tension between our attempts to be inclusive and our discomfort with inclusivity – a disconnect between what we say about our inclusive theology and community, and what we do in *fostering* an inclusive theology and community. Can we say we are inclusive when we are eager to repudiate some expressions of faith? This is where my experience of life meets my theological view and world view, as I explore how this is shaped by race. I find that to be an embodied, authentic, theologian – embodying all of me – I need to do it in private.

Society dictates our perceptions

In her 1973 book *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* Mary Douglas, cultural anthropologist, wrote that we have two bodies – the discursive body we call society and the physical body of self. Douglas said, 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived.' Society, as one body with its dominant culture and values, dictates how we perceive physical bodies around us. Douglas continues, 'The physical experience of the body is always modified by the social categories through which it is known, and therefore sustains a particular view of society.' So, each of our bodies – whatever our racial makeup – will experience society through the lens of its dominant culture. This modifies our perspective of our 'selves', which we then propagate.

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“The mask I wear in society to fit in prevents me embodying my theology. And it has made my understanding of my authentic self invisible.”

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So, I look at my body through the lens of society’s power structures – that dominant culture – white, male middle-class. And I look at the power structures through the lens of my physical body (my gender, race, age, etc.) – as I was taught to by the power structure. That view is modified because I am influenced by the hegemony in which I live.

The mask of invisibility

Frantz Fanon, a colonial theorist, psychiatrist, black male in the 1950s, author of *Black Skin White Face*, describes feeling and being seen as ‘out of place’ or ‘other.’ This is especially prevalent in a western culture dominated by white, male, heterosexuals. Fanon describes how black people wear masks of acceptability, to fit. He explores the colonial black man’s psyche (writing in a time when women were considered second-class citizens) to define what it means to be black, to not be respected, to be unequal, to be invisible.

He finds the only means of being seen as equal is to be perceived as white – or more accurately – to wear the mask of whiteness. That is to adopt the ruling power’s, civilities, values and culture to fit in. Fanon explains that the black man – in order to succeed – must learn to speak like a white man, walk like a white man, sit like a white man, even worship like the white man and desire everything white. He desires recognition as human when myths such as cannibalism, hypersexuality, demon worship and lack of intelligence have made him invisible.

Indoctrinated into what’s acceptable

The mask I wear in society to fit in prevents me embodying my theology. And it has made my understanding of my authentic self invisible. I was indoctrinated in what is acceptable in religious, political, work and spiritual matters – and in the ‘made in God’s image’ theology of that dominant culture. It is only now, in my 40s, that I have found the strength of my ancestors to explore beyond it.

My body, identifiable by colour and the genetic reality of ancestry DNA – encompassing Africa, Caribbean, Ireland and the Americas – now aids in my spiritual understanding of my bodily experiences. Therefore I recognise the inherent racism in:

- Institutions that carry the history of colonial power and privilege which have yet to examine those legacies and accept multiculturalism.
- Use of the word ‘coloured’ to describe a black person.
- Stereotypical ‘your mama’ jokes about black mothers.
- Continual use of statistics which stress the higher numbers of imprisoned black youths without contextualising the number of non-black youths who are more consistently released without charge.
- Ignorance of and failure to understand the moved-by-the-spirit theology of black churches – the clapping, stamping, the circling and shuffling, the praise words.

For people of colour, this all perpetuates the wearing of Fanon’s white mask. The truth is, although our congregations are welcoming to all people, they don’t do anything consistently to make welcome my black skin in the worship structure and style. So, Fanon’s black skin, white mask stays on. The mask may hide more pain and anger and contempt, than simply a wish to fit in. The mask is wearing thin.



Winnie Gordon

The Rev Winnie Gordon is minister at Unitarian New Meeting Birmingham and Kidderminster New Meeting House. Part 2 of this article will appear in the 4 April issue of *The Inquirer*.

Radical happiness

I write on International Women's Day 2020. I am in New York and I am thinking about hope, joy and happiness. On International Women's Day in 2017 I heard the veteran activist Angela Davis speak in London. She said that we live in critical times, and that critical times are the best times for hope. We cannot do the work we need to do without hope and without joy.

This week, walking through the warm early spring afternoon in Washington Square park, with its pockets of live jazz, people playing chess, its skate boarders and push-chairs, I am reflecting on her words, aware of the precarious moment in which we live. The virus shadows us. The daffodil days feel numbered. Yet here I am, in this lively, curiously old-fashioned city, where one warm day brings people out to the park to chat, play music and walk, virus or no virus. Here is public pleasure in being alive, that nourishing sense of human exchange and vitality that lifts me today amongst all the news of coronavirus, conflict and meltdowns.

Being hopeful activists

Angela Davis's call to hope and joy as essential drivers of change is part of a long tradition of understanding two sides of the aspect of human flourishing we call happiness. It says we have been conditioned to understand happiness as a private affair, but public happiness is about participation in the public sphere. Its place is not only in the public park but in the public spaces in which we co-create the structures of our collective life, the social, political institutions that we have made in order to function. The sociologist Lynne Segal calls this participation 'radical happiness'. Her book of the same name contains a proposition. We can find radical happiness in our utopian dreams and our shared creativity. This means working for a future we can build as hopeful activists, not by scrolling down a to-do list of jobs to make a more equal world but by creatively imagining ourselves into a world we want to be in — a world not ruled by economic rules but made in imagination and love. It's not a new idea. It has a long history and you may

RISING GREEN

By Claire MacDonald



find its echoes in the ideas of that early radical Jesus — but more recently in the UK it was proposed by Richard Titmuss, the first professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. His research found that people give, share and make change through compassion and connection and not when they are simply given statistics on how bad things are.

Time for 'social dreaming'

Lynne Segal says that we have become less happy because happiness has become equated with rating individual success. It has been co-opted by commerce and the world of statistic, metrics and measurement. As Dmitry Fadeyev says in his blog on public happiness: 'Private happiness refers to private accumulation of wealth and its enjoyment, or the partaking in private activities for your own pleasure. Public happiness—which is, perhaps, the only form of happiness—refers to the participation in the public sphere, that is, in having a part in the affairs of the state.' (See: <https://fadeyev.net>)

Segal says we need social spaces that foster connection. The kind of connection that allows for 'social dreaming' and sharing of joy makes a difference between a world where collective purpose is crowded out and a world where



“We find our best selves, and the divinity that rests there, when we are together in common purpose.”

Shown left: Unitarians celebrated and marched in Swansea Pride.

human flourishing is primary. Of course we are each important. Part of nourishing the spirit is caring for ourselves and our journey. We know the importance of caring for ourselves, giving our own well-being attention and being comfortable in who we are. We know that being at home with ourselves is essential in caring for others. We also know that caring involves not just wiping up, but celebration.

You know that old song Bread and Roses, written by Rose Schneiderman at the turn of the last century? It says that the worker must have bread, but she must have roses too. We can make change through joy and the celebration of common purpose and values, and through deep delight in a world we do not want to lose.

A moment of collective joy

Celebration is a fascinating word. Its origin in Latin is as a religious word about honouring and performing ritual. It has an even older connection to the Latin word *celer* — which we also see in *accelerate*. It contains the idea of pace and frequency, something that is seen to happen and so gets renowned. Celebration has an even *older* connection to Greek, from the word *kello* — which refers to a ship putting in to a harbour or a shore. So ‘celebrate’ contains the idea of coming home to safety like a ship coming to shore, and it suggests something that happens again and again and is renowned among a throng of people, and something that moves swiftly. A celebration is a crowded coming home, a moment of collective joy.

A worker must have bread but she must have roses too. Rose Schneiderman’s times were tough and so are ours. Keith Hebden in his book *Re-Enchanting the Activist: Spirituality and Social Change* says that God is what we find when we shape that better future we can only make together; that God is the word for the dynamic spirit of

“Radical happiness allows us to let go of rampant and destructive *individualism* but not our precious *individuality*.”

human flourishing that happens when we allow that spirit to rise between us. It is in our hands. Radical happiness is always potentially present, even in uncertain times. It connects what we need as individuals to what we want to change together. Radical happiness allows us to let go of rampant and destructive *individualism* but not our precious *individuality*. It suggests that we find our best selves, and the divinity that rests there, when we are together in common purpose; that we can live

differently in these times of binaries, agitation and aggression when we become more than the sum of our parts.

Thoroughness and love

Carolyn McDade, whose hymn *Rising Green* lends its title to this column, puts it like this on her website, ‘... I often wonder what it would be like if we dared to love this life — the fragile and the vulnerable, the endangered, daring to be humble before the magnitude of our beginnings, daring to lean our species into a stubborn and pliant wonder, until reverence shines in all that we do — until we live an economics of reverence, a theology of reverence, a politics of reverence — until it permeates education, development, and health care, homes and relationships, arts and agriculture — a reverence for life, for planetary, social, and personal wholeness.’ Below this she adds, ‘This is our purpose now. May we do it well, with thoroughness and love.’ A celebration is a crowded coming home, a moment of collective joy.

A worker must have bread but she must have roses too. We cannot do the work we need to do without hope and without joy.

This is our purpose now.

May we do it well, with thoroughness and love.

Doris says: Drop thy still dews of
quietness

Pipe down! (Please ...)

I thoroughly enjoyed Phil Silk's article 'Seeking Silence (*Inquirer*, 22 February). I agree that too much noise can have a deleterious effect. I am a member of Pipedown: (See: <https://pipedown.org.uk>)

They ask: 'Do you hate unwanted piped background music? (also called piped music, canned music, elevator music, muzac etc) Do you loathe its incessant jingle? Do you detest the way you can't escape it? (in pubs, restaurants and hotels; in the plane, train or bus; down the phone; ruining decent television programmes; adding to the overall levels of noise pollution in public places)'

It is also an incontrovertible fact that the people with tinnitus, the blind and the autistic find that background music makes their life more difficult. It is well-known that the right music at the right time can be very helpful for healing, relaxation and pleasure but the wrong sort of music at the wrong time is nothing but a nuisance and may cause problems rather than cure them.

I am somewhat horrified by the number of people who feel the need to have music playing all the time. When I see a runner with earpieces and trailing wires I am tempted to yank out the wires and yell, 'Above a lark is singing, listen and enjoy.' A busy street may seem like an ideal place to escape into your headphones but not the countryside, surely.

I am also worried by the number of apocryphal stories told of teachers playing music to 'calm children down'. As an ex-teacher I can assure you that the thing children need to be calm is a teacher not yelling at them. An ex-colleague once announced that she had made a noisy school into a quiet one in less than half a term. We obligingly cried, 'Oh, Margaret, tell us, do!' She replied: 'I stood in the corridor and did not shout.'

If children are agitated it may well be the absence of music that is causing the agitation. Some people seem to be becoming addicted to music and, as all us ex-smokers can tell you, being deprived of the source of your addiction causes stress. Lighting up your first cigarette of the day floods your body with calm. If children are agitated, they need less noise – not more.

And so, I would ask you to consider in your worship, are you offering enough time for people to think? Ponder on this: you offer them a reading which you have chosen

DORIS' COLUMN

By Dorothy Haughton



very carefully for its link to the subject of your address and then you instantly whip them up out of their pews, fumbling with hymn books and carolling away. If it were that important, why not give them at least a minute to consider what has been said? Congregations may be a bit uppity at first as they are used to charging through the service at breakneck speed in order to get to the real purpose of the coming together which is coffee (at which they will not, as I have deplored often and oft, discuss the pearls you have scattered before them but pig-like argue over the cost of bourbon biscuits – Lidl or Asda?)

I wrote in a previous article, 'I like music to open and close the service but I do wish people would shut up so I have a brief period before the service to empty my mind of daily concerns and a brief period at the end to consider what has been said.'

We surely go to a service to learn something or be shown how to see something in a different light, as well as meeting others and, of course, finding out where to buy our biscuits. Perhaps we should have a service when we learn to be quiet.

Make me a channel of your peace.

To ask for help is to give a gift

My fiancée Sue and I recently took a trip to the shops at Cheshire Oaks. The plan was to purchase my wedding outfit. It was a successful couple of hours. And even though we looked in every single menswear shop, the suit I chose was the very first one that took my eye. As soon as I saw it, I thought, I like the look of that one – and nothing we looked at afterwards came close. While Sue came along, she knew I wouldn't be overly influenced by her thoughts on things. I can be quite single minded over such matters; some might say stubborn.

The suit seemed the easiest part of the process and the assistant was really helpful, without being too pushy. I had mixed experiences in other shops as I looked for a shirt, tie and shoes to complete the outfit. Some of the shopping assistants we encountered were both encouraging and genuinely helpful, others were not. Some were even dismissive, one or two were mocking. I know which I responded to, and which just made me want to flee. It is vital how a person responds when asked for help. I had an experience of responding to someone in need recently. As I left the gym I noticed a large, elderly woman struggling with her wheelchair. Other people seemed to just walk on by. I was tempted to do that too, as I was in a rush. But I stopped, even though it was pouring down with rain. There was a problem with one of the wheels and she couldn't propel herself. So I found myself pushing her to a shop at the other end of the high street. As we got there, I asked the shop assistants to come out to help, which they did. She was not the easiest of people; but I left her in safe hands. The woman needed help, was asking for it, and gratefully received it when it came.

There is power in asking for help

The two experiences led me to reflect on my own attitude towards asking for help. I am not someone who finds it easy to ask for help. Pride is definitely my kryptonite. I am much more comfortable offering my hand than accepting that of another. That said, my greatest personal spiritual growth has been in those moments of humility – times when I have felt powerless and completely lost, when I have had to surrender and ask others for help. It has happened on several occasions these last few years. I have learnt that asking for the help is not an abdication of responsibility, quite the opposite. The power of asking and gratefully receiving help has often been enough to lead me to taking the appropriate action, to be responsible and to walk alongside others in mutual aid and inspiration. Asking for help is not about becoming dependent on

FROM NOTHING TO EVERYTHING

By Danny Crosby



others; it is a genuine act that recognises our human interrelatedness. There is a time in all our lives when we need help from others and they need help from us. There are no singular givers or receivers in life; we all give and we all receive at times. Paradoxically, the one who gives often receives abundantly in so many ways.

No one pulls themselves up by their bootstraps completely alone, all by themselves. From the moment of our births others are involved. They create who we are and who we become. As the old saying goes, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. No one lives entirely from themselves. We are all a part of an interdependent web of relationships. Life has taught me that asking for help is a sign of strength and wisdom, not weakness. It is a sign of good, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Of course, it is not enough to merely ask for help, true healthy humility is about accepting what is offered.

To ask is to give. From the cradle to the grave we need to keep asking for help and we need to make ourselves available to others in their need. Isn't this the essence of human relationships? This is not to say that we become unhealthily dependent on others and society as a whole, no not at all. We are, though, a part of a whole – a complex whole that makes life and community. As we grow and change and become the people that we are this changes shape and reforms constantly. It seems that we are being born again and again to new versions of ourselves. Of course we cannot do this alone. We cannot give birth to ourselves, no one can. We need help, and sometimes we need to ask for help from others. And, when we do, it is not only a service for ourselves, but for them as well.

I have come to believe that communities like ours are environments where we learn to serve one another and life itself. If I have learnt anything about the spiritual life, I have learnt that at its core are two basic principles; love and service. Surely the spiritual life is not just about serving ourselves, but one another. By doing so we feed one another's spirits. I have learnt that in that relationship, in that space, we can experience the Love that is Divine.

Letters to the Editor



Selection does not explain our origins

Roger Booth
Sidmouth

To the Editor: 'We created man from a drop of mingled sperm.' (Qur'an, Surah 76,2)
I have recently been dipping into



Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion* in which he argues against creationism in the sense of a god who created the universe. He also disputes the idea that the irreducible complexities of nature (of which the human eye and the Venus firefly plant are good examples) have arisen by chance.

He thinks that the reason for the existence of the amazing phenomena in nature is natural selection as described by Darwin. We would agree that this is probably the answer. Slight alterations in the DNA over

millions of years have cumulatively resulted in the wonderful structures. But Darwinian selection does not explain the existence of the original matter which was subjected to the first change. There must have been something there for the first slight alteration to operate on. The Qur'an suggests a drop of mingled sperm or a clot of congealed blood, but there must have been something! So must we not re-introduce a creator?

Shown left: Richard Dawkins by Mike Cornwell, Wikimedia Commons

More Roedean memories

Rosemary Goring
St Leonards on Sea

To the Editor Brenda Knopf's letter (*Inquirer*, 7 March) brought back memories of my schooldays – in particular, a wet afternoon when we were doing a question-and-answer lesson in Scripture.

'What are the beliefs of the Unitarians?'

'Well,' said the Vicar of Rottingdean, who was in charge of the RE lesson, 'as I'm not a Unitarian myself, I can't answer that one.'

'There's a Unitarian here,' came a voice from the back.

'Let's hear from her, then,' said the Vicar, in some relief.

People turned round and looked at me as I made my way to the front of the class, conscious of not looking my best. I had washed my hair that morning and it was all over the place. I turned and faced my classmates, feeling totally unprepared.

I have no idea what I said, but somehow the words came. These were all people I knew, after all – and they were listening with interest. The only thing I was conscious of were the comments dropped by the Vicar. They were snide comments, aimed, it seemed to me, to destabilise.

'They ill-become your cloth!' I thought furiously – but there was no chance to respond.

The lesson came to an end, and we all clustered together at the back of the classroom. A couple of girls came up to me. 'We'd like to know more,' they said. 'Can you tell us sometime?'

'Well, sometime,' I mumbled. I was so totally overwhelmed, I just wanted to disappear.

Our mother and grandmother had both been to Roedean. Worship at school, in the chapel, followed the Anglican pattern, but at home we went to Lewin's Mead, one of the Unitarian places of worship in Bristol – that was where we belonged. How was it that we had never been told that Roedean – this prestigious school, where the Vicar was no doubt very happy to come and preach – had been founded by a Unitarian family?

Later on, my sister and I did attend the Brighton Unitarian church. There we learned that, in our mother's day, the girls from Roedean occupied a third of the spacious chapel. And Brenda Wortley, later to become Brenda Knopf, who played tennis for our house, was to make a phenomenal contribution to the Unitarian movement in Southampton.

Rosemary Goring is a member of Brotherhood of the Cross and Star

FREEDOM

IARF looks at Judaism in Eastern Europe

By Derek McAuley

Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein, President of Liberal Judaism, delivered the 2nd Annual Lecture of the British Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) with the theme of 'Religious Freedom in Post-Communist Europe'. The Lecture was held at the Montague Centre, the headquarters of Liberal Judaism in central London.

Rabbi Goldstein talked about how the experiences in Communist times makes it difficult for organised religion to revive after that dark period. Sometimes it is not the lack of freedom shown by the State, but by the inability to deal with freedom, the inexperience of creating new religious structures, and the internal divisions within the religious community itself that can be a real problem. In 1978 he initiated connections with Czechoslovak Jewry and has led many visits by groups to the Czech and Slovak Republics since the Velvet Revolution. He has helped to develop Liberal Judaism in these countries and acted as consultant rabbi to congregations in Prague, Brno and Bratislava.

Ninety percent of the Jewish community in Bohemian and Moravia were murdered by the Nazis. Due to the policies of the Communist regime most of the Jews who survived the Holocaust escaped from the country in 1948 and then during the Prague Spring two decades later. A virulently anti-Zionist and antisemitic regime began really oppressing the Jewish community, especially after the Slansky Trial in 1952 and again after the Six Day War in 1967.

After the Velvet Revolution in the Czechoslovakia, as was the case throughout the Former Soviet Union and its satellite countries, there was an immediate explosion of interest in Judaism.

'Initially it was very exciting and rewarding. But then the Western world and its capitalist values spread. The joy of freedom soon had to confront the reality of the new world ... Though I can tell you all is not lost and there is still great interest in Judaism though in most central European countries it is Jewish culture rather than Jewish religion. After decades of the suffering brought about by State Atheism and Nazi ideology it's not surprising that a Jewish God is hard to find.'

The new State authorities take differing approaches. The Czech Republic is now the most positive towards Jews and Israel of all of the European Union countries. Slovakia, with its strong Roman Catholic culture is less so. In Hungary the super nationalism has made for problems. Romania is a bit of an anomaly as even in Communist times Jewish life was allowed to continue.

Concluding, Rabbi Goldstein said 'Despite difficulties I have outlined, compared with the restrictions and often danger inherent in private and communal religious life during the Communist period, today offers almost complete freedom for those who wish to express or follow their religious faith. The real challenges come from being religious in the capitalist, hedonistic, frenetic, social media obsessed society we call the Free World.'

Derek McAuley is chair of the British Chapter of IARF

Wendy Williams will be missed

Wendy Williams

(21 August 1935 – 7 January 2020)

Wendy came from a long-established Unitarian family on her mother's side. The Hinkins had been associated with Unitarianism since the early 19th century, and with her twin sister Rosemary Tomlin and elder brother Michael their mother created a Unitarian Sunday School at home in Luton. Following education at Luton High School, Wendy went on to qualify in radiography in London, Manchester and Oxford and joined Unitarian groups in each city.

In 1960 she decided to take her qualification to Canada, and she stayed there and the USA for 37 years, joining congregations in various places, in particular Vancouver. She was married there by the Rev Philip Hewett in 1973 to William Appleman Williams (Bill of course), a leading

professor of diplomatic history. They lived in Waldport, Oregon; here she played the piano each week at the nearby Episcopalian Church where her husband was a member and she worked as a radiographer for some years. Bill died in 1990: Wendy returned to England in 1997 to be with her family and re-join the Unitarian movement. Living in Bletchley she became a member of the Watford Fellowship, joining her sister. Wendy participated in many Unitarian groups, and was a regular attendee at the General Assembly. Ill health in the last year prevented her recent attendance at events but her lively presence will be missed. The funeral service was held at the Freeman Methodist Church in Bletchley; the minister was assisted by Rev Martin Whitell who also conducted the committal service at Bletchley Crematorium.

Obelisk stands against slavery

By Ray Beecham

Situated in Cairo Street Unitarian Chapel, Liverpool, close to the steps leading to the Priestley Gate, is an obelisk commemorating the lives of William and Anna Robson and their two sons William Holbrook and Edwin. William Robson was postmaster and a leading citizen of Warrington.

Anna Robson was the daughter of William and Margaret Gaskell and amongst her siblings were William, Robert and Samuel Gaskell and Elizabeth Holland who, like she, were all advocates of social reform. Like her husband William she was an advocate of the abolition of slavery and William justifiably holds a place in the history of Warrington for his campaigns against slavery.

Even by the 1850s there was strong opposition to slavery from some quarters in Warrington, resulting in the formation of the Warrington Anti-Slavery Society. The Rev Philip Pearsall Carpenter was minister of Cairo Street Chapel from 1846 to 1858. He travelled to the Southern states of America to see the conditions of slaves for himself in 1859. He defied the threat of being tarred and feathered to lecture against slavery. Elizabeth Gaskell and Carpenter's eldest sister, Susan Gaskell – wife of Anna's brother Robert – were amongst Warrington women involved in supporting the anti-slavery cause. They regularly sent contributions to the Annual anti-slavery fair (or Bazaar) in Boston, Massachusetts USA.

In 1858 William Robson travelled to America to campaign against slavery and in Boston he met Charles Redmond and his sister Sarah Parker Redmond, an internationalist activist for human rights and women's suffrage. William was instrumental in persuading Sarah to travel to England via Warrington to gather support for the abolitionist cause in the United States. Her ship arrived in Liverpool on 12 January 1859. It had not been an easy journey. The ship had been covered with ice and snow and Sarah had become so seasick that she had to regain her strength with a few days of recuperation in William Robson's home.

Many sources state that Sarah's first lecture in Britain was given in Warrington but her very first British lecture, on 21 January 1859, was given at the Tuckerman Institute in Liverpool. The Warrington lectures were, however, intended to be the inaugural speeches of the tour and the first one was held on 24 January 1859 at Warrington Music Hall.

Sarah's first Warrington speech was free, and it was so well attended there was standing room only. The meeting was presided over by Robert Gaskell, secretary of the Warrington Anti-Slavery Society. Contemporary accounts describe the meeting as the best-attended public event in the town's history, with an audience comprised mostly of working people.

After the success of the first meeting a second one was

arranged, again at the Warrington Music Hall, for 31 January 1859. There was a small charge for this meeting, which solved the overcrowding problem. One contemporary account notes that during this lecture a Mr William North, an ex-slave from South Carolina now living in nearby Earlestown, was also on the platform with Sarah.

A third lecture was given on 2 February at a luncheon meeting of women in the assembly room of the Red Lion Hotel. This was a brief talk as Sarah was feeling unwell. After the speech Mrs Ashton, a local abolitionist, made a speech saying she, 'felt proud to acknowledge (Sarah) as a sister' and presented her with a watch inscribed, 'Presented to SP Redmond by Englishwomen, her sisters, in Warrington. February 2nd, 1860'. Sarah Redmond responded emotionally:

I do not need this testimonial. I have been received here as a sister by white women for the first time in my life. I have been removed from the degradation which overhangs all persons of my complexion; and I have felt most deeply that since I have been in Warrington and in England that I have received a sympathy I never was offered before. I have therefore no need of this testimonial of sympathy, but I receive it as the representative of my race with pleasure. In this spirit I accept it, and I believe I shall be faithful to that race now and forever.

William remained friends with many of the American abolitionists long after his visits to America. In 1877 he invited Lloyd Garrison to his home at Lymm near Warrington where a banquet was held in his honour. This letter written by William Lloyd Garrison on 7 September 1858 to Stephen and Abby Foster from Boston records his friendship with William Robson.

My Dear Friends:

I am glad that my friend William Robson is to receive a welcome at your bands, under your roof, as he is in all respects worthy – being an uncompromising abolitionist, a vigorous and independent thinker, and a very conscientious and deeply religious man, strongly inclined to Swedenborgianism theologically, though by education a Unitarian. He was the friend of Henry C Wright and Parker Pillsbury when they were in England. As postmaster at Warrington, he occupies a highly respectable and influential position at home; and I doubt not that his visit to this country will furnish him with the materials to aid our cause quite efficiently on his return home. He is anxious to make the acquaintance of the most noted abolitionists, so that he may be able to speak of them intelligently on his return. You will find him an honest, sincere, outspoken man.

The obelisk gives a clue to William's interest in Swedenborgianism but to find out more you must visit our chapel garden and burial ground.

Ray Beecham is secretary and head gardener at Cairo Street.

