



Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship

Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre
16-18 Fitzroy Street, Kirribilli
(near Milsons Point Station)

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Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

1 December Martin Horlacher "Fiction and Faith: Three Perspectives on Jesus"

One of the most powerful mediums in the world is the art of fiction, and, over the years, fictional works about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ have been many and varied. This talk will examine three such fictional depictions from popular culture - namely, those versions as put forward in print and on screen by Mel Gibson, Jose Saramago, and Nikos Kazantzakis/Martin Scorsese - and their interpretations of and impact upon one of the best-known stories in history.

8 December Morandir Armson "Coming up to Christmas."

Christmas has become a major plank, both of the Christian religion, and of Western cultural life. But where did the traditions of Christmas come from? This presentation will focus on Christmas traditions, drawn from the Pagan Norse and Romans, from Mediaeval and Renaissance mysticism, and from Georgian and Victorian cultural traditions".

15 December Contributions from the Spirit of Life family: poems, readings, musical items, sharing thoughts (maybe of Christmas) followed by festive refreshments. Please give the title of your item to Jan Tendys on a Sunday or by email.

Christmas and New Year Break

12 January Ginna Hastings will introduce a group discussion of what we are about, hopes, plans etc.

19 January Martin Horlacher "The History of the Devil"

26 January Jan Tendys "How I became a Patriot."

For my generation of lefties "patriotism" was a suspect word. Over my lifetime, I have become a rather fierce patriot—but still able to see the difference between Australia's cultural ideals and our actual performance.

GEOFF USHER'S 6 DECEMBER PRESENTATION OF DICKEN'S "A CHRISTMAS CAROL" WILL BE AT PITT ST UNITING CHURCH 264 PITT ST. ADMISSION FREE. YOU MAY WISH TO DONATE TO "CHRISTMAS BOWL" CHARITY COLLECTION.

Is Doing Church the Way Forward?

Eric Stevenson

I feel partially apologetic for my recent outburst that our current gatherings are not viable. By that I meant that **based on present statistics and/or our current way of doing things, we will not be in existence in ten year's time.** It is not a satisfactory excuse to quote other institutions that are suffering from the same problem. I feel a responsibility to future generations who in my opinion will need the kind of religion which Unitarianism offers young Australians. I am not disparaging the importance of our history and our tradition, or of time honoured rituals like lighting the chalice. I also think our seven principles are very relevant. I think our concept of Universalism is essential. What bothers me is that in spite of our inclusive name, our refined ethical principles, and our emphasis on social justice, we have not held a great number of visitors who have felt attracted to us during the last eight years. Why didn't they stay with us? So, if you are asking the same question, let us consider **what religious experiences we can provide that the next generation of UU's will be in need of.**

Let us start with why we do it. Whether it is, like my non-church friends, over breakfast, or after work, in the pub or at the beach, or like me, in the Kirribilli Community Centre, **what is the central purpose of human beings meeting together in a regular gathering to search for or celebrate the meaning of human existence?** In our case, is it because we are seeking spiritual sustenance in hard times? Is it, like Colin said last month, to reinforce our commitment to our seven principles and to encourage each other to practise them? Is it because the people who come constitute our major community of principled and caring friends who love and respect each other? Is it because we value that fellowship and see the need to cultivate it by regular face-to-face contact? Is it because we have the need to jointly and continually attribute worth to the good things in life and to express gratitude for their source, whether it be to God, or to people or to nature or to good luck? Or is it because we need to chill out in good company one day a week with the assistance of meditation, education, or inspiring statements and good music? **In other circumstances would any of these goals appeal to the future generations of a thriving Spirit of Life congregation?**

Secondly, **let us consider what we do and how and when we do it.** Despite the fact that I do church every Sunday, more than half of my family and friends do not, and I know it is because it doesn't suit them!! Is the place and time ok? The most meaningful conversations among my non-church associates take place at home after dinner when people are not rushing away to go somewhere else or in a hurry to get back to an expired parking meter or catch a train. Should we stop threatening to spoil their weekends by offering meetings on Sunday mornings? **They don't sing our kind of songs; they don't use our religious language.** Is it because less and less of them have been inducted into the way we speak or the symbols which we continue to use in church (like standing to sing, dressing up in our Sunday best, or closing our eyes to talk to God)? **And they don't go for religious hierarchies or practical theology.** I suspect they think it is playing religious games and that it is a lot of gobbledegook. Furthermore, **should we cultivate a less pious atmosphere?** Should we have more fun, more laughter, more humour like Geoff introduced last Sunday on the Hugging Virus? **Does the formality sit well with them?** Should we continue to sit in rows of unoccupied chairs and stand up to sing? Should we stick to a fixed program and should we separate morning tea from music and preaching and greeting each other and the sharing of spiritual ideas and paying the rent?

In trying to get inside the minds of the next generation I have neglected to mention a number of more important questions. One is, **"Why not ask them?"** When we get an answer maybe the next question should be, **"Will they help us do it?"** And lastly, **"Will we let them???"**

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# Atheists, Theists, Foxholes and Fundamentalisms

*Martin Horlacher*

The place of faith, religion and secularism in today's world is a difficult topic, and a very hot one. Are all spiritual and religious people essentially deluded? Or are there really, as some would say, no atheists in foxholes? And is agnosticism a tenable position?

These are all difficult and maybe even dangerous questions, but ones that I think need to be asked. Almost every day – at least, depending on where you look – we see conflicts wrought of religious anger and sectarianism somewhere in the world. The Middle East would be an obvious candidate if you want to pick one part of the world that has such problems, but remove the motes from your own eyes and look closer to home for a moment. The United States of America may not be torn by religious violence in the sense that much of the Middle East is, but it has its own problems when it comes to conflicts revolving around religion, particularly in the so-called Bible Belt.

And here in Australia? Granted, I think we have it somewhat easier than our American counterparts in this respect, but the rise to greater prominence of what one could call the Christian Right has, in my view, been a cause for concern, particularly when it comes to politics.

I think we can agree, a lot of problems in today's world are, at the very least, exacerbated by religious conflict, if not caused by it in the first place. But, in recent years, we have seen the rise of another phenomenon, one directly related to the issue of religion – the rise of passionate, polemical anti-religion. Books with titles like The God Delusion and God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything have become international bestsellers, and have, in turn, spawned numerous counter-polemics (from Christians and other religionists) decrying the very notion that morality, hope and order can exist apart from belief in a theistic, interventionist deity.

This explosion of anti-religionist thought and word was, I think, really pretty inevitable – a long overdue backlash against the resurgence of religious (and typically Christian) evangelism seen in much of the West (particularly the United States) over the last few decades. But, is it the one, true, best answer to that religious revival? Must one abandon any supposed “middle ground”, and choose only between the passionate anti-theism of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens on the one hand, or the pious zeal of a group like the Religious Right on the other?

Or, does saying that you're “spiritual, but not religious”, or “agnostic, maybe even a panentheist, but definitely neither a theist nor an atheist” really mean something?

Or...is that view just a total copout?

I have struggled long and hard over the last few years to define – even to myself – just what it is that I personally believe regarding all this, and, to some extent, it's a struggle that's still ongoing.

For the moment, however, let me conclude these opening words with a quote from the great American orator (and passionate agnostic) Robert Green Ingersoll, who, in 1876, wrote:

“While utterly discarding all creeds, and denying the truth of all religions, there is neither in my heart nor upon my lips a sneer for the hopeful, loving and tender souls who believe that

from all this discord will result a perfect harmony; that every evil will in some mysterious way become a good, and that above and over all there is a being who, in some way, will reclaim and glorify every one of the children of men – but for those who heartlessly try to prove that salvation is almost impossible; that damnation is almost certain; that the highway of the universe leads to hell; who fill life with fear and death with horror; who curse the cradle and mock the tomb, it is impossible to entertain other than feelings of pity, contempt and scorn.”

[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robert\\_G.\\_Ingersoll#Quotes](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robert_G._Ingersoll#Quotes)

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Atheism. Theism. Agnosticism. Humanism. Monotheism. Henotheism. Polytheism. Gnosticism. Deism. Temporary agnosticism. Permanent agnosticism. Ignosticism. Apatheism. Pantheism. Panentheism. Transtheism. Antitheism. Secularism. Unitarian Universalism.

That’s one heck of a lot of “-isms” – and it’s not even all the ones you can find out there.

Who could’ve guessed that there’d be so many terms you could come up with to try and define what people do – and don’t – believe? On one level, it could be seen as dehumanising – I have to admit that I find any effort to delimit, demarcate and reduce my beliefs about the nature of the universe and humanity to a simple term a little trite. But, on the other hand, another part of me has always been greatly fascinated in what different people believe about life, the universe, and everything else, including God – and having terms to apply to all the different views expressed when researching a topic like this one certainly helps.

Let me give you an example: namely, my own spiritual views, at least in a nutshell. If pressed to apply a term to myself, I would, at least at this point in my life, have to define myself perhaps somewhat clunkily as an agnostic with a fairly strong inclination towards panentheism when it comes to the question of the existence of God, and a secular humanist in regards to how I conduct my everyday life.

It’s important to define just what is meant by those terms in order to make sense of them. Agnosticism, as defined by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia is:

“[T]he view that the existence or non-existence of any deity is unknown and possibly unknowable. More specifically, agnosticism is the view that the truth values of certain claims – especially claims about the existence or non-existence of any deity, as well as other religious and metaphysical claims – are unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism>

The same resource defines panentheism as:

“[A] belief system which posits that the divine (be it a monotheistic God, polytheistic gods, or an eternal cosmic animating force), interpenetrates every part of nature and timelessly extends beyond it.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panentheism>

In other words, not only is God synonymous with the material universe, but God is also in all, and all are God. Or, something like that.

This view of God leaves itself open to some interpretation, but it is still a far cry from the typical view of the Almighty in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which are, traditionally, theistic – and, more to the point, monotheistic. To again quote Wikipedia:

“Theism, in the broadest sense, is the belief that at least one deity exists...[it] is commonly a monotheistic doctrine concerning the nature of a deity, and that deity’s relationship to the universe. Theism, in this specific sense, conceives of God as personal, present and active in the governance and organisation of the world and the universe.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theist>

This, of course, stands in stark contrast to atheism, which the same resource defines thus:

“Atheism is, in a broad sense, the rejection of belief in the existence of deities. In a narrower sense, atheism is specifically the position that there are no deities. Most inclusively, atheism is simply the absence of belief that any deities exist.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheist>

Indeed, this is essentially the definition of atheism as I have long contemplated and understood it. In today’s world, and (I personally think) throughout much of human history, it is probably the view held deep down by many more individuals than would readily admit to it, even to themselves.

However, some individuals, particularly in today’s world, have gone out of their way to demonstrate that this is indeed their view, and have been very vocal about it. Some who classify themselves as atheists, let alone agnostics, may still occasionally be heard to say that they would like to believe in a God of one sort or another, or in an afterlife where we all meet again and settle our many differences, but lament that the evidence simply isn’t there to prove or even suggest it. Others, however, go much further in their profession of non-belief in any deity. For example, the late Christopher Hitchens, in his bestselling tome God Is Not Great, maintained that he was not just a plain old atheist, but actually an avowed and uncompromising “anti-theist” – that is, not simply someone who lacked any belief in a God, but someone who was emphatically grateful that there was (at least in his view) absolutely no evidence whatsoever for the existence of such a being.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/side-effects/201202/why-does-richard-dawkins-take-issue-agnosticism>

I have no doubt that there are many of a devoutly religious – and, more to the point, theistic – persuasion who would immediately point to this perspective as the absolute epitome of an “arrogant, conceited, I-can-do-whatever-I-want-and-there’s-nobody-to-stop-me” viewpoint, or whatever other negatively-charged label critics would like to attach to it...perhaps even a form of “self-worship”, as I have heard at least one theistic critic in the Australian press arrogantly dismiss all non-theism as being. Maybe I can even understand why some people, particularly if they are theists, would initially take this view of Hitchens’s outlook. And yet, if it is the God of the Abrahamic religions we are talking about, as it invariably is when one makes reference to the “man upstairs”, then I think Hitchens has a perfectly valid point. Take just what Christians call the New Testament, for example; while the deity who populates its pages is certainly less accomplishedly disagreeable than that of the Old, he is still a thoroughly objectionable and unlovable character – one who sees fit to punish his own son before he can bring himself to forgive humanity for its finite transgressions, and who punishes those finite transgressions with infinite, horrible, fiery retribution (just read the Book of Revelation, and you’ll see what I mean). Hitchens, in one of his many impassioned speeches, called the version of heaven offered by Christianity, with its frightful, tyrannical deity watching everyone and cruelly smiting anyone who dares disagree with him, a “celestial North Korea”⁶ – and I’d have to say that I’m inclined to agree.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=1Tw3i3k4zCs>

Taking all of this into account, it becomes quite clear that terms like “atheist”, “agnostic”, and even “theist” are actually pretty useless unless you define just who and what the God you’re talking about actually is. In much of what we call the Western world, many or perhaps even most of whom are asked would immediately identify “God” as being the deity of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition, who used to favour the Jews and now favours the Christians (and just which one of the many groups of Christians that would actually be is a complicated and contentious enough matter in itself); in the Middle East, by contrast, you would be answered that the one true God is Allah, of the Muslim faith. In either case, the deity in question is a theistic one – a God who intervenes, rewards, punishes, demands to be loved and worshipped unconditionally (or else)...in other words, an anthropomorphic God, and one who (depending on whom you ask) will invariably be found firmly favouring one side or another of politics.

Let me lay it on the line: if an atheist is one who, simply put, does not believe in a deity, then I am resolutely an atheist to that particular *kind* of God. It's not just that I do not believe in an interventionist deity with any number of harsh commandments and endless, brutal punishments for those who break them – it's that I *cannot*, with any kind of conscience, believe in such a God. Yet, at the same time, I cannot call myself an atheist in the commonly accepted sense of the term. "God", for me, is a power, a force, *something* that permeates what we call reality and transcends it. At the very least, God for me is life itself, and what I would choose to call the human spirit. God is simply the All, or, as Bishop John Shelby Spong has put it, "the Ground of All Being".

In the eyes of many theistic religionists in this world, such a perspective as the one I have just articulated may be nothing more than a slightly more palatable form of atheism. Yet I have a feeling that at least some passionate atheists, and particularly anti-theists, may find such a view equally objectionable.

In [The God Delusion](#), Richard Dawkins leveled heavy criticism not simply at theists, but at another group whom he described as "namby-pamby, mushy pap, weak-tea, weedy, pallid fence-sitters" – namely, agnostics.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/side-effects/201202/why-does-richard-dawkins-take-issue-agnosticism>

In a section entitled "The Poverty of Agnosticism", he argues that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other – God either exists, or he does not. He takes issue with the well-reasoned arguments put forward by great agnostic thinkers like Thomas H. Huxley, Bertrand Russell, and the aforementioned Robert Green Ingersoll, maintaining that he himself is only "agnostic" to the extent that he is "agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden" (ibid.).

I can see where he's coming from, but I don't entirely agree. Whilst I baulk at labelling Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens as "fundamentalists" in regards to their atheism, or at considering them victims of the same kind of ignorance that religious fundamental-

ists are indeed guilty of, I do still consider them willfully ignorant of what I consider to be a vast swathe of philosophical middle ground – one where agnosticism is a perfectly tenable position. To quote the psychologist Christopher Lane:

"[W]here freethought inevitably meets agnosticism and atheism, shades of gray are unavoidable – and sometimes even welcome." (ibid.)

Of course, those shades of gray can cut both ways. One argument I have seen put forward by theist critics of both atheists and agnostics is the adage that "there are no atheists in foxholes". Put simply, this argument states that there is not one individual in existence who would not only seriously consider calling out to God for help if they were in dire-enough straits, but actually do it, too – and in their view, this includes even the most passionate atheist or antitheist. I can recall at least one amusing (albeit probably apocryphal) story about the great funnyman Groucho Marx, who was as famed for his atheism as for his comedic talent. Supposedly, a close friend – who was tending to the comedian in his last days on his deathbed – was surprised to find Groucho flipping through a copy of none other than the [Holy Bible](#). When the friend asked him if he was actually entertaining the possibility of faith on the threshold of death, Groucho is said to have replied: "Hell, no – I'm just looking for the loopholes".

In my opinion – and I *could* be wrong – it is almost certainly true that there are no atheists in foxholes. Maybe it's just me, but I *can* conceivably see even the most hardened nonbeliever, even Dawkins or Hitchens, crying out to some kind of higher power, were the situation desperate and despairing enough. *But* – and this is the part that the theists and religionists always seem to conveniently leave out – even that does not prove that there is a God, a higher power, or a life hereafter. What it would quite conclusively prove, is that we are fundamentally weak, little, frightened creatures who inhabit an unfathomably huge, scary, and unforgiving universe – creatures who will, if desperate enough, call out to someone or something that may or may not be there to catch

us when we fall, much as any wounded, dying soldier in the heat of battle, about to leave this world for good, will call out to the mother who brought him into it. On the truth of that point, I am about as agnostic as Dawkins is about the fairies in his garden.

Ultimately, if asked to choose between the classical meanings of the terms “atheist” and “theist”, I can choose neither; it is “agnostic” that I go with. I agree with Robert Green Ingersoll, the so-called “Great Agnostic”, that “an honest God is the noblest work of man”, rather than the other way around

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robert_G._Ingersoll#Quotes

– yet, like him, I harbour no scorn or contempt for those who hope that there is someone out there, someone who, to quote him again, “will reclaim and glorify every one of the children of men.” (ibid.). I agree with him that the “Holy Trinity of Science” – Reason, Observation and Experience – “have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so.” (ibid.) And I agree with his statement that kindness is the sunshine in which virtue grows”

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/r/robert_green_ingersoll.html

– and that that holds absolutely true regardless of where you stand on the existence (or non-existence) of a higher power.

And hey, for what it’s worth, I am steadfastly of the opinion that, in this day and age, it’s absolutely vital to discuss the issue of a supposed “higher power” – though not for all the same old reasons you might initially suspect. Indeed, it very much depends on what the vast majority of the human race – at least in the technologically proficient, industrialised world – would now often regard as a “higher power”...and I’m talking the entire gamut of views on God’s existence.

To illustrate my point, I think of a certain comic strip I once read, in which an inquisitive, philosophical, but obviously confused young boy, reading through a book in his living room, says to himself: “It says here that ‘religion is the opiate of the masses’. What’s that supposed to mean?”.

And, in the background, the family television

set, with a crafty, conniving and somewhat Machiavellian expression on its screen, thinks to itself: “It means Karl Marx hadn’t seen anything yet”.

In my opinion, definitely food for thought. On that point, I am not the least bit agnostic...and, if he were alive today, I doubt Robert Green Ingersoll would be, either.

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***The above is a talk given by Martin at our Fellowship on 5 May, 2013.***  
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**I do not have a
Personal Relationship with God.
Patrick Murfin**

I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.
I've lost his phone number; he never answers his mail.

We did not, as young men,
hang out on Wednesday nights,
cigarettes dripping from our lips, at
pool halls.

He is not there like an old neighbour to
fix my broken lawn mower and
hand me a soda
on a blazing hot day.

When I rip my shin on a jutting shelf and
cry out his name,
he does not rush to me
with Band-Aids and peroxide

He does not, at times of vexation,
when my world lies shattered,
my relationships ruptured, my
children insolent,
my finances hopeless,
come with soothing counsel to my side.

He does not take my requests
like a long-distance dedication
on America's Top Forty,
or deliver within five business days
or my money back
on my catalogue order -
my business is not important to him.

I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.

But in quiet moments -
in the familiar whistle
of a red-winged blackbird on a cattail, or
in spider webs glinting with dew in the
grass of a clear sunrise,
or the passing attention of an old cat -
He/She/It/Whatever does not
speak
or do
or answer
but admits me to fleeting union
With the Creator.



Photos: wikipedia

Contributed by Rev. Geoff Usher



Photo: Janet Fang



Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

Membership is open to all adults and includes this journal. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 . If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website www.sydneyunitarians.org .Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher or Ginna Hastings for an application form at the Sunday service.

If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jantendys@yahoo.com.au or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation? As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service*

Fellowship contact 0466 940 461