



Schedule of Services

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



1 February Ginna Hastings "Getting Old"

Nobody likes getting old. How can we make the best of aging, and make the winter of our lives into the harvest of our lives? This matter will be discussed by Ginna based on books she has read on the subject and her own experience. Then it will be opened to a brief discussion.

8 February Morandir Armson "The Esoteric World of Walter Burley Griffin".

Walter Burley Griffin, was an important American architect and landscape designer, who invented several important architectural innovations, including the L-shaped house and the carport. Burley Griffin won the Federal Capital Design Competition in 1912 and was thereby given the task of producing the first town design for Canberra. Griffin was strongly associated with an esoteric movement, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy Society, which influenced his architectural and town plan concepts and designs throughout his later life, which included the time he spent in designing the new city of Canberra.



15 February Helen Whatmough "Freedom of Speech"

How in today's world do we define and relate to freedom of speech both individually and nationally especially with regard to threats of terrorist activity?



22 February Martin Horlacher

"You're Gonna Carry That Weight"

A meditation on the problem of suffering.

The Church that doesn't believe in anything.

There are Presbyterians who vote Democratic and Presbyterians who vote Republican. No one calls them "The church that doesn't vote for anything". There are Lutherans who eat lima beans and Lutherans who do not. No one calls them "The church that doesn't eat anything". There are UUs who believe that God exists, UUs who believe that God does not exist, and UUs who believe that the nature of God is beyond human comprehension. This upsets people and they call us "The church that doesn't believe in anything." (Ted Pack)

From the website of UU Fellowship of Stanislaus County
<http://www.stanuu.org/beliefs.html#addition>

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The following is an address which aroused considerable interest last year and it is printed here to allow members and friends to read at their leisure.

### Neoplatonism, then and now.

*Martin Horlacher.*

"Neoplatonism" is actually a modern term which has been used to designate a tradition of philosophy that arose primarily in the third-century AD, and which persisted until shortly after the closing of the Platonic Academy in Athens in 529 AD by the-then Byzantine Roman emperor Justinian I. Neoplatonists were heavily influenced both by the great ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and by the ensuing Platonic tradition that thrived during the six centuries that separated the first of the Neoplatonists from Plato.

Collectively, the Neoplatonists constituted a continuous tradition of philosophers who began primarily with the philosopher Plotinus, and with his teacher Ammonius Saccas. As Neoplatonism is expansive in its scope, and since the followers of this philosophy varied greatly in their views and approaches in many ways, it is difficult to reduce the philosophy to a concise set of ideas that all Neoplatonic phi-

losophers shared in common. Thus, the most concise definition of Neoplatonism casts it as an historical term, one which refers to the work of Plotinus, and to the many thinkers who developed, responded to, and criticised his ideas – much as Plotinus himself had done with the original teachings of Plato.

What is particularly important to note, however, is the impact and influence that the philosophy of Neoplatonism has had upon Western thought since its inception, and not least of all upon the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Middle Ages, Neoplatonic ideas were integrated into the philosophical and theological works of many of the most important mediaeval Jewish, Christian and Islamic thinkers. In Muslim lands, Neoplatonic texts were available in both Persian and Arabic translations, and notable thinkers such as al-Farabi, Avicenna and Moses Maimonides incorporated Neoplatonic elements into their own thinking. The philosophy also had an impact upon Italian Renaissance thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, as well as even earlier, in the Middle Ages, when Thomas Aquinas had direct access to works by a large number of Neoplatonist writers. What's more, Neoplatonism has also extended into forms of culture beyond philosophy, and well into the modern era – to take just two examples, the work of modernist poets such as W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot contain many Neoplatonic themes and elements.

But, what of the actual teachings of the philosophy of Neoplatonism? And, how have they come to influence the ideas and thoughts of so many others over the past two millennia?

**In essence, Neoplatonism is generally a metaphysical and epistemological philosophy. It is a form of "idealistic monism", one which combines elements of both polytheism and panentheism.\***

*\*Some definitions follow and see end for some reminders from the Macquarie dictionary (Australian) . JT*

Polytheism, let's not forget, is the belief in multiple gods or deities – and panentheism, a term which pretty much sums up my view of the divine, posits that God (or whichever name you choose to ascribe to the divine) interpenetrates every part of existence, but also timelessly extends beyond it. Neoplatonism is “idealistic” in the sense that it views reality (at least, as we can know it) as fundamentally mental, mentally constructed, or otherwise immaterial, and “monist” in the sense that a variety of existing things (perhaps even everything) can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance, and asserts the presence of a unifying substance or essence. This essential worldview of Neoplatonism was laid out in the philosophy's primary and classical document, the *Enneads* of the philosopher Plotinus. As a form of mysticism, it contains theoretical and practical parts, the first dealing with the high origin of the human soul and showing how it has departed from its first estate, and the second showing the way by which the soul may again return to the Eternal and Supreme. The system can be divided between the invisible world and the phenomenal world – the first of which contains the ultimate, transcendent reality from which emanates everything and everyone else.

Arguably the central characteristic feature of the Neoplatonic system is its view of what we might call “God” – in this case, the idea of “the One” beyond being. For Plotinus, the first principle of reality is an utterly simple, ineffable, and unknowable subsistence which is both the creative source and the teleological end of all existing things. The One is so simple that it cannot even be said to exist or to be a being – rather, the creative principal of all things is beyond being. It is, essentially, the cause of the rest of reality, which takes the form of two subsequent “hypostases”, Demiurge and World-Soul.

The Demiurge is the archetype of all existing things, the highest sphere accessible to the human mind, while also being pure intellect itself – it is what manifests or organises the material world into perceivability. From this also comes the World-Soul, which is also immaterial – it stands between the Demiurge and the phenomenal world, permeated and

illuminated by the former, but also in contact with the latter. It embraces innumerable individual souls – those belonging to you and I – and these can either allow themselves to be informed by the Demiurge, or turn aside from it and choose the phenomenal world and lose themselves in the realm of the senses and the finite.

All of that is, essentially, the metaphysical view of Neoplatonism, at least as laid out by the philosopher Plotinus. But what of the practical philosophy? As Plotinus sees it, the individual soul must retrace its steps back to the One, along the same road by which it descended. In his view, this is accomplished by the practice of virtue, which aims at likeness to God, and leads up to God. He viewed God and the divine as reachable through “ecstasy” – that is, through the practice of virtue and philosophical contemplation. Although the Neoplatonists believed in the pre-existence and immortality of the soul, they also believed that human perfection and happiness were attainable in this world, without awaiting an afterlife – philosophical contemplation was what could be used to achieve those things. Nonetheless, they did believe in life after death, and in the principle of reincarnation, and that one's journey through the realms after death would be guided (at least in part) by one's thoughts and actions in this life – and, that a soul which has returned to the One achieves union with the cosmic universal soul, not descending again (at least, not in this world period).

Much of this outline of the spiritual view of Neoplatonist philosophy may very well sound familiar to those of us here in the so-called “Christian West” – one could be forgiven for thinking that Neoplatonism adopted a lot of its teachings from the Christian tradition, and from the Judeo-Christian scriptures in the book we call the Bible. **In truth, however, it was actually much the other way around – much of what we today call “Biblical” or “Christian” ethics is not Biblical or Christian ethics at all, but was adopted from Greek philosophy, and in particular from Neoplatonism. Take the doctrine of the immortal soul, for example – it is found nowhere in the Bible. The Judeo-**

**-Christian scriptures teach us – most especially in the New Testament writings of Paul of Tarsus – that, upon death, one’s body will lie in the earth until the end of the world, whereupon it will be resurrected for judgement. Nowhere in the Judeo-Christian scriptures does there exist the notion of an incorporeal spirit that immediately flies off to the afterlife upon one’s physical death – though, such an idea was taught by Greek philosophy, and it is from this tradition that the Christian church, in particular, has adopted this notion.**

Certain central tenets of Neoplatonism served as a philosophical interim for the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo on his journey from dualistic Manichaeism to Christianity. As a Manichee, Augustine had held that evil has substantial being and that God is made of matter – when he became a Neoplatonist, he changed his views on these things. As a Neoplatonist, and later a Christian, Augustine believed that evil is a privation of good and that God is not material. When writing his treatise “*On True Religion*” several years after his 387 AD baptism, Augustine’s Christianity was still tempered by Neoplatonism. Many other early Christians, including Origen of Alexandria, were also influenced by Neoplatonism, especially in their identifying the Neoplatonic “One” with the God of the Bible.

Additionally, from the days of the Early Church until the present, the Orthodox Church has made positive selective use of ancient Greek philosophy, including – but not limited to – Neoplatonism. For example, the term “Logos” – which many Christians today associate with the figure of Jesus Christ in the Trinity – actually originated with the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, and meant reason or thought. Of course, in the Christian context, it became a name for the second person of the Trinity. **In this way, the Christian tradition has, from very early on, adopted both the language and the concepts of ancient Greek philosophy, both Neoplatonist and otherwise.**

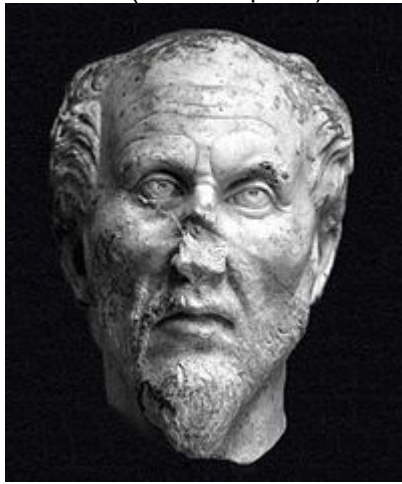
The philosophy of Neoplatonism would continue to be highly influential in both Eastern

and Western Europe into fairly recent history, particularly during the Renaissance. One notable thinker who followed and promoted the philosophy was the fifteenth-century Italian scholar, Catholic priest and Christian humanist Marsilio Ficino. During his lifetime, he translated philosophers such as Plotinus and Proclus – as well as the complete extant works of Plato – into Latin, and was in touch with every major academic thinker and writer of his day. His Florentine Academy, an attempt to revive Plato’s famous school from centuries earlier, had enormous influence on the direction of the Italian Renaissance and the development of European philosophy in general. What’s more, his close friend Giovanni Pico della Mirandola – who was the author of the famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which has been called the “Manifesto of the Renaissance” – was also a major figure in this movement. Both were students of Jewish mystical Kabbalah, which was itself heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, and their writings were hugely influential in the emergence and popularisation of Christian esotericism, which regarded the Christian faith in a much more mystical and mysterious way than the hierarchies of the various churches would have liked.

Neoplatonic philosophy would go even further in terms of inspiring philosophers and thinkers of later years – renewed interest in it would contribute to the rational theology and philosophy of the so-called “Cambridge Platonists” of the seventeenth century, particularly Ralph Cudworth and Henry More. This group of philosophers and theologians, though they identified as Christians of the Church of England, also drew heavily from the teachings of Neoplatonism. **They believed that reason is the proper judge of disagreements, and strongly advocated open dialogue between different Christian traditions of their day, including the Puritans.** Not surprisingly, the orthodox English Calvinists of the time found in the views of the Cambridge Platonists an insidious attack, bypassing as it did the basic theological issues of atonement and justification by faith. The Cambridge Platonists, by contrast, objected greatly to the anti-rationalism and dogmatism of the Calvinist Puritans – but, at the same time, they were also acting against the

reductive, materialist writings of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, which, while rationalist, they also felt were denying the idealistic part of the universe. To the Cambridge Platonists, religion and reason were in harmony, and reality was not known by physical sensation alone, but by the kind of philosophical reasoning to be found in the philosophy of Neoplatonism, and in Greek philosophy, in general.

Plotinus (from Wikipedia)



As a philosophy, then, Neoplatonism has indeed been hugely influential throughout history – and I have concentrated only on its influence in the Western world. One can certainly debate just how much of it the historical Plato of Athens would have followed and agreed with – he was not, in the strictest sense, its founder, even though it was developed from his ideas and thus bears his name. Nonetheless, just as the teachings of Plato helped to lay the foundation for much of modern Western philosophy, the philosophy of Neoplatonism has in turn influenced much of Western (and Eastern) religion and mysticism.

**And herein is what I find so interesting and invigorating about Neoplatonism – although it advocates a very mystical and spiritual view of reality, it does not disregard the use of reason and rational thought. Indeed, it positively insists on it. In Neoplatonism, one simply must think for oneself, and try their very best to make sense of life and of everything that life – and death – entail. I haven't yet decided whether I would think of myself as a full-fledged Neoplatonist, yet I certainly have very strong leanings in that direction. And why not? After all, it – along with much of**

**the rest of ancient Greek philosophy – has indeed influenced much of our society, right up until today, whether most people realise it or not.**

Truly, I think Neoplatonism, along with most of Greek philosophy, still has much to teach us that much modern religion simply can't – not least of all when it comes to the problem of evil in this world. Neoplatonism, for example, recognises "evil" only as the absence of good, as the lack of form and idea in reality – evil, here, is understood as a parasite, having no existence of its own, an unavoidable outcome of the universe and all existence. This was what Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, taught, much in the same way that Plato himself did. In this sense, reality and existence can be seen as both a curse and a blessing...and, in order to understand it all, philosophy and wisdom are absolutely essential. What this wisdom consists of is, in fact, the ability to extract from life experiences the fact that they are a reflection of the fundamental ideas of reality and of the One – such as justice, beauty, and above all, goodness. Thus, for Plato, evil arises not so much from our actions in the world, as from the fact that these actions represent a turning away from our true nature. To overcome this plight, one must look into one's own soul – whatever one takes that to be.

In this way, the teachings of Plato – and, in particular, the philosophy of Neoplatonism – still resonate today. I don't yet know if I agree with all of the teachings of Neoplatonism – I probably don't – but I do feel that it has, for quite a while, informed my view of the cosmos...and probably will continue to do so, for a long time to come.

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Metaphysics: That branch of philosophy which treats of first principles.

Epistemology: the investigation of the origin, nature, methods and limits of human understanding.

Idealism: (In philosophy) Any system or theory which maintains that the real is of the nature of thought, or that the object of external perception consists of ideas.

Platonic: (In philosophy) of or pertaining to ancient Greek philosopher, Plato.

Bits & Pieces

During the last hours of his life, Unitarian **Henry David Thoreau** was questioned about his beliefs by a concerned neighbour, who asked, "Have you made peace with your maker?"

"I never quarrelled with my maker," Thoreau replied.

The neighbour persisted, "Aren't you concerned about the hereafter?"

To this Thoreau answered, "One world at a time."

Paul Goodman on silence:

Not speaking and speaking are both human ways of being in the world, and there are kinds and grades of each. There is the dumb silence of slumber or apathy; the sober silence that goes with a solemn animal face; the fertile silence of awareness, pasturing the soul, whence emerge new thoughts; the alive silence of alert perception, ready to say, "This... this..."; the musical silence that accompanies absorbed activity; the silence of listening to another speak, catching the drift and helping him be clear; the noisy silence of resentment and self-recrimination, loud and subvocal speech but sullen to say it; baffled silence; the silence of peaceful accord with other persons or communion with the cosmos.

We light our chalice flame to start our worship period. The light of the flame represents our unending search for truth; the heat of the flame represents the warmth of love; the beauty of the lighted chalice represents our religious quest to bring the best into our lives and our world.

Just as the chalice candle/oil is consumed in its work of producing its light and heat, so too we will only be able to bring truth and love and beauty into our lives and into our world by transforming our beings into

sacred flames a sacrifice of self that is fed by the spirit of God acting through our lives and our relationships.

May our sharings and reflections today help to make our inner lights burn more brightly, bringing the light of justice to our darkened world.

John Clifford. The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Famous Universalist minister **Hosea Ballou** argued with a Methodist colleague over the issue of eternal damnation. The Methodist asserted, "if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven!"

Ballou answered, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you!"

Florence Nightingale quotes:

Rather, ten times, die in the surf, heralding the way to a new world, than stand idly on the shore.

So never lose an opportunity of urging a practical beginning, however small, for it is wonderful how often in such matters the mustard-seed germinates and roots itself.

"In disputes upon moral or scientific points," **Arthur Martine** counselled in his magnificent 1866 *Hand-book of Etiquette and Guide to True Politeness* "let your aim be to come at truth, not to conquer your opponent. So you never shall be at a loss in losing the argument, and gaining a new discovery."

"Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric." Bertrand Russell'

Concluding the James Martineau story.

Martineau admired Jesus, not as a "Messiah" or "Lord," nor as Intellectually infallible, but as an inspired man filled with the spirit of God. Jesus revealed to us a devotion to God that can strengthen our conscience. When we know our own highest and best, we are in fellowship with God. Jesus' Father becomes our Father. Thus, as Jesus was the incarnation of God, so are we all. Martineau prayed, "In all things, draw us to the mind of Christ, that thy lost image may be traced again, and thou mayest own us at one with him and thee."

To Martineau, to be a Christian was to follow where Christ led. He wished to avoid theological speculation about Christ's person and concentrate on his teachings. Nevertheless, to adopt the religion of Jesus was not to give preference to earliest Christianity. One form of Christianity was not better because it was older, he said. Martineau gladly used the methods of historical criticism to understand the Bible. He rejoiced in the light that science shed on theology. He investigated and spoke well of non-Christian religions. He wrote that he wanted "Christianity purified of superstitions, a Church intent only on Righteousness, and a Social habit of justice and charity to all men."

Martineau was a member of the Metaphysical Society, 1869-80, founded by Lord Tennyson. He held a prestigious and influential position as trustee of Dr. (Daniel) Williams's Trust, 1858-68, established in the 18th century to further the education of clergy. Martineau was given honorary degrees by five universities—Harvard, 1872; Leyden, 1875; Edinburgh, 1884; Oxford, 1888; and Dublin, 1892. On his 83rd birthday he received accolades from Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Benjamin Jowett, Ernst Renan, William James, [Joseph Chamberlain](#), James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot, and many others. He replied with characteristic modesty, "To be held of any account by the elite of those to whom I have habitually looked up . . . is an honour simply mysterious to me."

Martineau was a friend of Bishop John Colenso, Anglican bishop of Natal, whom he tried to have appointed to the Chair of Old Testament at Manchester College. Lord Tennyson was his lifelong friend. Others were [José Blanco White](#); G.G. Bradley, Dean of Westminster; Francis William Newman, brother of Cardinal Newman; William

Gladstone; Cardinal Henry Manning; Mrs. Humphrey Ward; John Stuart Mill; Prof. Thomas H. Huxley; Prof. Henry Sidgwick; and Prof. John Tyndall.

A man of discipline, Martineau never smoked and twice gave up drinking. Efficient in his work, he carried on voluminous correspondence. Politically, he was of the old Whig school and shared the concerns of the merchant and manufacturing class from which he had come. Gentle and dignified, he conversed with a courtly grace. A friend, Alexander Craufurd, an Anglican vicar, said, "Of all deep thinkers whom I have ever known he was the most free from the depressing modern malady of pessimism."

Martineau taught at Manchester College until 1885 and was Principal, 1869-85. After he retired from the College at the age of 80, he wrote his best known works. He published *Types of Ethical Theory*, 1885; *A Study of Religion*, 1888; and *Seat of Authority in Religion*, 1890. These volumes constitute an impressive systematic Unitarian theology.

Helen Martineau died in 1877. When Martineau died at the end of the century, he was buried next to his wife in Highgate Cemetery in London. He is commemorated by a portrait and a statue at Harris Manchester College of Oxford University.

James Martineau's works and manuscripts are located mainly at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, England. The college has a large collection of books from his library and books about him. There are letters from Martineau at John Rylands University Library of Manchester and at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, California. Among the works of Martineau not mentioned above are *Studies of Christianity* (1858), *A Study of Spinoza* (1882), *Faith and Self-Surrender* (1897). Many of his sermons were translated into German and Dutch. A good but brief resource is Alfred Hall, *James Martineau Selections* (1951).

This concludes the biography of James Martineau by Frank Schulman as published by the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society.

From the feedback your editor received it would appear that some members found Martineau had little to say to a modern Unitarian. However, it is important to know "where we are coming from". It is not so long ago that "the fatherhood of God, the leadership of Jesus and the brotherhood of man" summarised the belief of many Unitarians. If we are less narrow and less sexist now, we need to know how we got to be so.

Here's your English lesson for the day! "Complete" or "Finished"?

No dictionary has ever been able to satisfactorily define the difference between "complete" and "finished." However, during a recent linguistic conference, held in London, England, and attended by some of the best linguists in the world. Samsundar Balgobin, a Guyanese linguist, was the presenter when he was asked to make that very distinction.

The question put to him by a colleague in the erudite audience was this:
"Some say there is no difference between 'complete' and 'finished.' Please explain the difference in a way that is easy to understand."

Mr. Balgobin's response: "When you marry the right woman, you are 'complete.' If you marry the wrong woman, you are 'finished.' And, if the right one catches you with the wrong one, you are 'completely finished.'" His answer received a five minute standing ovation.

Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist Humour.

There are a number of collections of these online eg <http://www.imladris.com/Sandbox/index.shtml?UuJokes.html>

Many of these jokes are collected in the fine volume *The Church Where People Laugh* by Gwen Foss. They're full of unwarranted stereotypes suggesting that all UUs are flaky, coffee-swilling environmentally fanatical atheists ... as a UU, I find them hilarious. (Amanda Birmingham).

You May Be A Unitarian Universalist If...

- you think socks are too formal for a Summer service
- you think the Holy Trinity is "reduce, reuse and recycle"
- when you watch Jaws you root for the shark ("Hey, sharks have to eat too!")
- you think "Whatever" is a valid theological point
- you think a Holy day of Obligation is your turn to bring coffee hour treats
- you know at least two people who are upset that trees had to die for your church to be built.

Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. 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: jtendys@bigpond.com 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