



Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
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Volume 7, Issue 5

May, 2011

Schedule of Services

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

May 1 **Linda Horton (Guest speaker)** **"Why don't we have them? (What keeps people from becoming Unitarians?)"**

We are surrounded by people and families who share our Unitarian values, such as freedom, reason, tolerance, and self-determination in our theology; Barack Obama and Bishop John Spong spring to mind. Yet they remain "unchurched" or connected to other denominations. Why? How could we have drawn them to us--and do we want to? Our (May 1) service will explore these questions and will include the opportunity for your participation.

May 8 **Martin Horlacher** **"Transhumanism: Today's Dream or Tomorrow's Nightmare?"**

Transhumanism - whether we like it or not, it is the future of the human race, and that includes you. But just what does it entail? What are the implications for our children and grandchildren, and for all of us alive today? And what are the implications for the world we now live in, for democracy, for contemporary notions of human society? But, most importantly, what will it mean when it comes to how we view what it means to be members of the human race?

May 15 **Colin Whatmough** **"Learning from Easter Island."**

Most likely Easter Island is a striking example of the dependence of human societies on their environment and of the consequences of irreversibly damaging that environment

May 22 **Laurence Gormley** **"The Winter Cometh."**

We explore the unique joys and challenges of the winter season and their relevance to our religious faith.

May 29 **Janine Matthews (Debut talk)** **"Live in the Present Moment."**

We often get caught up in the past and we worry about a future that will possibly not even happen.

June 5 **Ross McLuckie** **To be announced**

June 12 **Jan Tendys** **"Reverence"**

June 19 **Candace Parks** **"Questions You May Ask"**

June 26 **Rev. Geoff Usher** **"Courage and Change"**

God and Me (continued)

Rev. Lloyd Geering

But although the Assembly dismissed the charges, there was no easy way to heal the divisions that had now become public. Robert Wardlaw, the layman, resigned from the church and established one of his own. A number of individuals in the church transferred their allegiance to other denominations. The various metropolitan dailies once again devoted editorials to the subject. The trial even rated a mention in the London Times. The Catholic newspaper "The Zeelandia" was rather impressed by my defence, and likened me to Martin Luther – but then went on to say "where does this leave the Presbyterian Church, now it has sold Christianity down the river?" Well, that of course was to be found out. "The New Zealand Weekly News" had a leading article on it, which declared "the church will never be the same again". And in many ways it was right.

Just thirty years after I had embraced the Christian faith, the year 1967 became the second religious turning point in my life. You see, with many others over these thirty years, **I had come to regard the church as a holy society, manifesting a very special quality of life. And it came as a great shock to me to find that behind its benign face, it could also harbour poisonous thoughts and sheer hatred. At one stage I was under police protection. And all this came from people in the church who regarded themselves as its most zealous guardians. It made me feel shame for the church. The sad realisation came to me that although there are, of course, many fine people in the church, the church as an institution is just as human as any other human institution.**

In April 1968, my book God in the New World was published. And on the same page of one newspaper there were two reviews. They were polar opposites. One of them said "this explains the real nature of the Bible". The other, written by the editor of the "Catholic Tablet", said "this book sweeps away all Christian belief". My chapter on God in that book ends with these words: "by God-talk, we are pointing to the deepest reality we can encounter. We are pointing to that which concerns us ultimately – but we do not know

what it is. The God that is known is an idol. The God who can be defined is no God. Because it is of the essence of human existence that we live not by knowledge, but by faith".

Of course, what had gone before the publication all helped to make the book a best-seller. As I had now become a public figure, I was invited to contribute to a series of monographs being prepared for seventh forms in schools. And mine was to be entitled "God in the 20th Century". And there I spoke of the history of the word "God" – why it had to be treated as a symbolic word. Just as in mathematics, for example, we have to learn how to use – and how not to use – the symbol for infinity, so in religion, we must learn how to use – and how not to use – this marvellous symbolic word "God".

Apart from that, life went on for me pretty much as usual during the next three years. I set about researching and writing a book on the topic that started it all off: the Resurrection. But before this book was published in 1971, I had already left my position in the theological hall. **I realised I had become a kind of marked man. Conservative forces in the church were ready to pounce on the slightest provocation; almost anything I said was taken up – and sometimes wrongly.** Because of remarks I made on a television interview that I gave in Brisbane in 1970, these conservative forces proceeded to persuade the General Assembly of that year to dissociate itself from my views – without specifying what views they were, actually. So many in the church heaved a sigh of relief when three weeks after that Assembly, the Victoria University of Wellington announced that they had elected me to be the first Professor of Religious Studies in any New Zealand university.

Then I entered an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and calm that I hadn't felt for quite some time. And this also was an opportunity that I welcomed, to return to the wider field of the study of religion generally – including, of course, the study of all religions. Because of the theological controversy in which I had been involved, I chose, as my chief area of research, the phenomenon of religious change in the modern secular world. And in my second year, I instituted a new course called "Religion in Change". And as a

result of the work for that course, I eventually wrote a textbook for it, which was published in 1980 as Faith's New Age.

In this book, I concluded that in modern times, humankind has entered a vastly different cultural world from that which obtained when the great religious traditions of the world were being founded. And so the major part of that book traces this change, step by step, from the late Middle Ages right up until the 19th century. And the book itself is set in a model, or paradigm, of three successive cultural periods through which humankind has lived and in which the diversity of human religious experience can be more clearly understood. And I found the paradigm I had constructed – of three great cultural periods – so illuminating and helpful that it is implied in all my later books.

The first cultural period I call the "ethnic phase" because during it, the many independent cultures around the world evolved out of their own ethnic identity, and served to perpetuate it. And in this phase, there is no distinction made between religion and culture, or between morality and ritual. People saw themselves as living in a world controlled by the gods and spirits that personified the forces of nature. And these forces were often very fickle and quite immoral – but they had to be obeyed, and kept in good humour.

And then came the second cultural period, which I call the "trans-ethnic", because at this point, ethnic identity is relegated to second place. Religion and culture now came to be distinguished from each other. Ritual and morality came to be distinguished from each other – even the Israelite prophets decry sacrifice, but put all the emphasis upon social justice. And of all these traditions, there were three that were most successful in crossing cultural/ethnic boundaries. And they were: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. So that by the year 1900, they had carved up the world among them: the Buddhist Orient, the Islamic Middle East, and the Christian West.

But already, before 1900, a third phase of cultural evolution had emerged: one that I call global and humanistic. Whereas the first was ethnic and polytheistic – or many gods – and the second was trans-ethnic and theological – i.e. some form of theological understanding of an ultimate – the third is global and humanistic.

The modern humanistic culture is now spreading around the globe – much, of course, to the annoyance of the traditional religions. And this form of modern global culture is undermining the traditional forms of religion, including Christianity – out of which, of course, it came. And it is also, therefore, giving rise to reactionary religious movements trying to stem the tide of the third phase of culture. And these reactionary movements we know as fundamentalists – Christian fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, Hindu fundamentalists: they are all trying to stem the tide of humanistic, secularistic culture.

In Faith's New Age, I tried to show that while the modern world is sounding the death-knell of traditional religious forms, it is at the same time heralding new ways of what it means to be religious. Religious thought and endeavour must now fasten attention upon this world, rather than upon the other-worldly goals. And that is why religion in the third phase can be called secular – not meaning non-religious, but meaning this-worldly. In the new cultural age, we are becoming aware of the fact that we are all humans, irrespective of our class or race or gender or religion or age. We are developing a growing concern for human rights. We have come to see that what used to be regarded as divine or transcendent absolutes are actually simply the human judgements made by our forbears in the past.

A few weeks ago, I delivered a lecture to the Royal Society of Scientists in Wellington, in which I explored what lay behind the words of a German physicist called Friedrich von Weizäcker. He said: modern science would not, perhaps, have been possible without Christianity. And we do well to ponder that, because he said (going on from that): the church is blind to the true nature of modern times, and the modern world is equally blind to its own nature. Both are blind to the significance of the secularising process: the modern world is the result of the secularising of Christianity.

Of course, the modern world is no longer Christian in the traditional sense – but neither is it anti-Christian. The modern world, at its best, holds in high regard the

the moral values, the aspirations, the social goals it has inherited from the Christian tradition. It is the logical development of the doctrine of the incarnation of God in human flesh.

Only a fortnight ago, I was delivering a lecture to some two hundred alumni of Auckland University – most of them medical graduates. I had been given the title "Playing God". By this is meant the fact that we humans have now reached the point in our cultural and religious evolution where we are now required to make decisions that previously we assumed were the exclusive province of God. Of course, in all activities of special breeding, we've been doing that for quite some time. But now, we are gaining such control over the forces and understanding of nature that we have some decisions to make about the creation of new life, and over questions of life and death: contraception, in vitro fertilisation, euthanasia, genetic modification, cloning, and we are determining – often unthinkingly – what species should survive, and what should become extinct. We are already playing God without knowing it. And are we humans ready for these responsibilities? Probably not. But these responsibilities are now on our shoulders, whether we are ready or not.

And that is all the more reason why we must all do our best to gain a clearer understanding of the cultural situation in which we live on this globe today, and to understand how we got to be where we are. And secondly: we must strive to search for whatever wisdom we can glean from the past that will help us make wise decisions in the choices we now have to make in our playing God.

In my latest little book [Is Christianity Going Anywhere?](#), I contend that we have come to the end of traditional Christianity, and I point to the new phase which it has already entered. Indeed, if we look around us in the modern, secular world, we find already there many of the elements that Jesus talked about when he spoke of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has been coming, and we haven't even noticed it. It's becoming when we asserted human rights for everybody. It's becoming when we emancipated women from male domination. It's becoming when we freed the slaves. And it is coming as we still painfully try to give fairness to ho-

mosexuals. And this book further suggests that we have discovered sufficient of the footprints and the voiceprints of the original Jesus, to help us and inspire us in the path ahead.

To conclude: during my lifetime, I have seen and I have experienced great religious change. And that is why – first in my preaching, and then in my teaching, and finally in my books – I have tried to interpret that change as clearly and as honestly as I could. While finding myself living in an ever-changing world, I have strangely discovered that much that I have learned from the Christian past unexpectedly lights up with new meaning for today. And so I conclude this story of God and me with some words of the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. He said: "the eye with which I see God, and the eye with which God sees me, are one and the same eye".

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This article was the conclusion of a talk given by Lloyd Geering to Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, in October 2004. The first part of this talk was printed in the April 2011 issue of [Esprit](#)  
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Global Warming

Eric Stevenson sent in this letter written by Chris Roylance, Paddington, which appeared in the Letters SMH 9-10 April 2011

A team of UC Berkeley physicists and statisticians that set out to challenge the scientific consensus on global warming with a study that long-term sceptic Professor Richard Muller described as "more precise" than any other ever undertaken has embarrassingly discovered that there is no factual basis to their scepticism, with preliminary results identical to the prevailing scientific view.

If it was humanly possible to find evidence of any errors in the near 100 per cent scientific consensus that supports anthropogenic global warming, then this team would have found it, as they received significant financial backing from oil billionaires Charles and David Koch, who are the planet's biggest and most prominent funders of efforts to prevent curbs on the burning of fossil fuels (the largest contributor to greenhouse gases which cause global warming), so the fact that

they have been unable to unearth any inconsistencies or errors confirms the certainty that none exist.

Global warming is real, the scientists have been right all along, and we need to take action on curbing our emissions sooner rather than later if we are to have a sustainable and affordable future - so the only experts we should now pay attention to are the ones with letters after their names, not with names at the end of their letters.

Read the New York Times account of this research : Study of Temperature Data Confirms Warming Trend, Scientist Tells House Panel. <http://www.nytimes.com/gwire/2011/03/31/31greenwire-study-of-temperature-data-confirms-warming-trend-84356.html>

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## **Encouragement**

*Jan Tendys*

Politicians need encouragement to do the right thing. If you believe global warming is a reality and is caused by the greenhouse gases we humans keep pumping into the air, how about sending some encouragement to Julia Gillard and Greg Combet to stick with the carbon tax?

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New Member Profile

Janine Matthews says she is "the original Sydneysider". All her family have lived in Sydney. The first one was a soldier in 1817 and since then all lived in Sydney. She grew up in Randwick and at one time there were 15 family members just in Randwick.

She was a marketing manager until she was 40 and then could not handle the 'corporation' any more so switched to teaching. She has a son who lives in the south of France and a daughter who lives in the Southern Highlands with her father. Janine is separated from her husband.

Janine was brought up Catholic and

went to a convent school. She describes herself as having been very interested when she was young, but later became disillusioned.

She first heard of Unitarianism by seeing the brochure in the glass case outside Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre. Then she looked it up on the internet. The 7 principles made great sense to her.

She says, "It is good to be a part of a like-minded group with a spiritual base".

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## **Anti-Gay Bill in Uganda**

*Jan Tendys*

The fledging Ugandan Unitarian Universalist Church has been adversely impacted upon by a movement to stigmatise lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people. This movement has arisen under the influence of the American religious right.

A newspaper in Uganda published the names and addresses of people it believed were gay or lesbian. It called for their deaths. The paper was sued by a gay rights activist group which won the case. However, one of the group, David Kato, was then murdered.

An anti-homosexuality bill was being considered in parliament. It has been condemned by various world leaders including Barack Obama. The bill was altered to make homosexuality punishable by life imprisonment rather than death. However, international pressure succeeded in having it put on "hold". It hasn't been passed, but nor has it disappeared.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has responded by financially helping Human Rights groups in Uganda.

It seems necessary to dispel the notion that GLBT people are more likely to be sexual predators and a threat to the young than heterosexual people.

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Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional.

Time might be a great healer but it is a lousy beautician.

Margaret Armstrong

I am bigger than Jesus but I can't turn water into wine!

Eric Stephenson

A message from our friend, Rev. Gretta Vosper, a liberal United Church minister in Canada, recommending a Sydney Festival performance in January, sent me and my friends to the box office for a late booking. She urged us to see Rick Miller, whose family belong to her congregation. Consequently about ten of us secured an opportunity to participate in a landmark progressively religious, one man presentation, "Bigger than Jesus" at the Australian Theatre Company.

In this incredible play, Rick held us spell-bound for one and a half hours with a varied selection of numerous dramatic art forms enacted along with the expertly timed implementation of visual and electronic equipment. He used sand painting, puppetry, dance, impersonation, singing, parody, preaching, rear-projected video, dramatic sound effect and much more to send a sinfully humorous yet totally respectful wake-up call to the Jesus in all of us. Rick was the Jesus of the Church of Rational Thought conducting a service in which the words of the Catholic Mass were respectfully recited. At the same time fundamentalism, literalism, creationism, the doctrine of original sin and the existence of purgatory were debunked while family values, the integrity of human beings, respect for scientific discovery and compassion for humanity and nature were evident throughout.

The chat session in the foyer with the large numbers of the audience who stayed behind after the show was a "must do" for Rick. He explained that sharing face-to-face with us was an integral part of the total drama of his understanding of the Mass. As this exhausted actor sipped his welcome glass of red, he confessed that unlike the real Jesus he was not 33 but 40, and admitted that he could not turn water into wine! He said, however, that the play had elicited deep human emotions in response to his kind of Jesus from members of audiences struggling with the meaning of life.

A big thanks to Gretta for telling us about her friend, and to Rick for the unique ways he chose in his act to promote principles with which Unitarians totally agree. The show was

so well presented that I wrote to him asking if, when he was in Australia again, could he please come and do a repeat of the show for us. He has replied in the following terms:

"I don't think we can make a return trip to Sydney next year... scheduling difficulties and other issues. BUT, if we do I would be happy to find a way to help. It's not likely we will have any of the Bigger than Jesus set or props with us, but I could try to do a low-tech 'lecture' version of some of the play. It's not quite the same experience, but it's something...I will keep you posted if there are any plans on another OZ trip. Take care Rick"

Before assuming the character of Jesus on stage, Rick impersonates(?) a free thinking young man who does not believe that Jesus is the literal Son of God or that Christianity is the only way to salvation. In truth he is relating a part of his own spiritual journey. He says he doesn't know what salvation really is, and that when you hear the word God, you can think whatever you wish to think: a Heavenly Father, the awesome precision and complexity of the universe, just another three letter word...it is up to you.. This prolific and versatile artist has co-created and directed a new and effective medium in which to demonstrate the fourth of our seven Unitarian Principles, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning". We will be eagerly awaiting his return to Sydney

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## **Jottings**

***Helen Whatmough***

We've had several visitors from the US recently. Tom and Susan were in Sydney again. Thank you, Tom, for impromptu piano playing. Ginna's mother has been able to see her daughter in her Aussie setting and Janet's mother and father are with us again - in fact, Linda is taking a service. Thank you, Linda.

Candace and Eric are the latest to see an operating table and we wish them a good recovery.

## Interfaith Declaration on Climate change

*The nurturing and respect for Life is a central doctrine of all faiths on Earth. Yet today we are endangering life on Earth with dangerous levels of greenhouse gas emissions. These gases are destabilizing the global climate system, heating the Earth, acidifying the oceans, and putting both humanity and all living creatures at unacceptable risk.*

*The extraordinary delicacy of Nature's balance is becoming increasingly apparent, even as human actions inflict ever larger, more dangerous and potentially irreversible changes on the indivisible web of atmosphere, earth, ocean and life that is creation. Today our faiths stand united in their call to care for the Earth, and to protect the poor and the suffering. Strong action on climate change is imperative by the principles and traditions of our faiths and the collective compassion, wisdom and leadership of humanity. We recognize the science of climate change, and we call for global leaders to adopt strong, binding, science based targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases in order to avert the worst dangers of a climate crisis. We urge the nations of Earth to ensure that those who will suffer under climate induced changes such as more severe storms, floods, droughts and rising seas, be aided to adapt, survive and equitably prosper.*

*We recognize that climate change is not merely an economic or technical problem, but rather at its core is a moral, spiritual and cultural one. We therefore pledge to join together to teach and guide the people who follow the call of our faiths. We must all learn to live together within the shared limits of our planet.*

*We recognize that just as climate change presents us with great challenges, so too it offers great opportunities. Mitigating climate change can stimulate economies sustainably, protect our planet, lift up the poor, and unite to a common cause people threatened by a common danger. Assisting vulnerable communities and species to survive and adapt to climate change fulfils our calling to wisdom, mercy, and the highest of human moral and ethical values.*

*We commit ourselves to action – to changing our habits, our choices, and the way we see the world – to learning and teaching our families, friends, and faiths – to conserving the limited resources of our home, planet Earth, and preserving the climate conditions upon which life depends.*

*In this spirit, we call upon our leaders, those of our faiths, and all people of Earth to accept the reality of the common danger we face, the imperative and responsibility for immediate and decisive action, and the opportunity to change..*

(The above declaration was signed by representatives of the world's major religions).

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2nd grade school children give their opinions.

Why did God make mothers?

1. She's the only one who knows where the scotch tape is.
2. Mostly to clean the house.
3. To help us out of there when we were getting born.

How did God make mothers?

1. He used dirt, just like for the rest of us.
2. Magic plus super powers and a lot of stirring.
3. God made my mum just the same like he made me. He just used bigger parts.

What ingredients are mothers made of?

1. God makes mothers out of clouds and angel hair and everything nice in the world and one dab of mean.
2. They had to get their start from men's bones. Then they mostly use string, I think.

Why did God give you your mother and not some other mum?

1. We're related.
2. God knew she likes me a lot more than other people's mum like me.

What kind of a little girl was your mum?

1. My mum has always been my mum and none of that other stuff.
2. I don't know because I wasn't there, but my guess would be pretty bossy.
3. They say she used to be nice.

Contributed by Candace Parks

Asylum Seekers, Some Facts.

Everyone has the right to seek asylum in Australia.

(Australian Migration Act 1958)

The majority of people seeking asylum who arrive by boat are genuine refugees fleeing torture and persecution.

(Department of Immigration Annual Report 2008—09)

Asylum seekers arriving by boat make up less than 2 percent of our annual migration intake.

From the booklet “**Let’s Change the Conversation**” produced by Amnesty International.

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 publication.

Please note that Esprit is assembled usually in the last week of the month so longer items should be handed in or sent by the second last Sunday of the month. Items for the Schedule of Services (talk titles etc) should be in by the Friday of the last week. Variations to this timetable may be necessitated by circumstances.

Preferred method is as an MS-WORD or email to jtendys@bigpond.com
Hardcopy (or electronic media) submissions can be hand-delivered to Jan or posted to:

Spirit of Life
PO Box 1356
LANE COVE NSW 1595

Please note:
If space is limited, submissions may be subject to editing.

Do you have a topic of a spiritual 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.

Just let Candace know what you would like to speak about and when you are available and we will fit you into the schedule.

Also, please feel free to give us your feedback on any of the services. This is the best way to ensure the services address the needs of the congregation.

Would you care to join us? Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring 9428-2244, consult our website www.sydneynunitarians.com or speak to one of our members before or after the Sunday service. Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee.