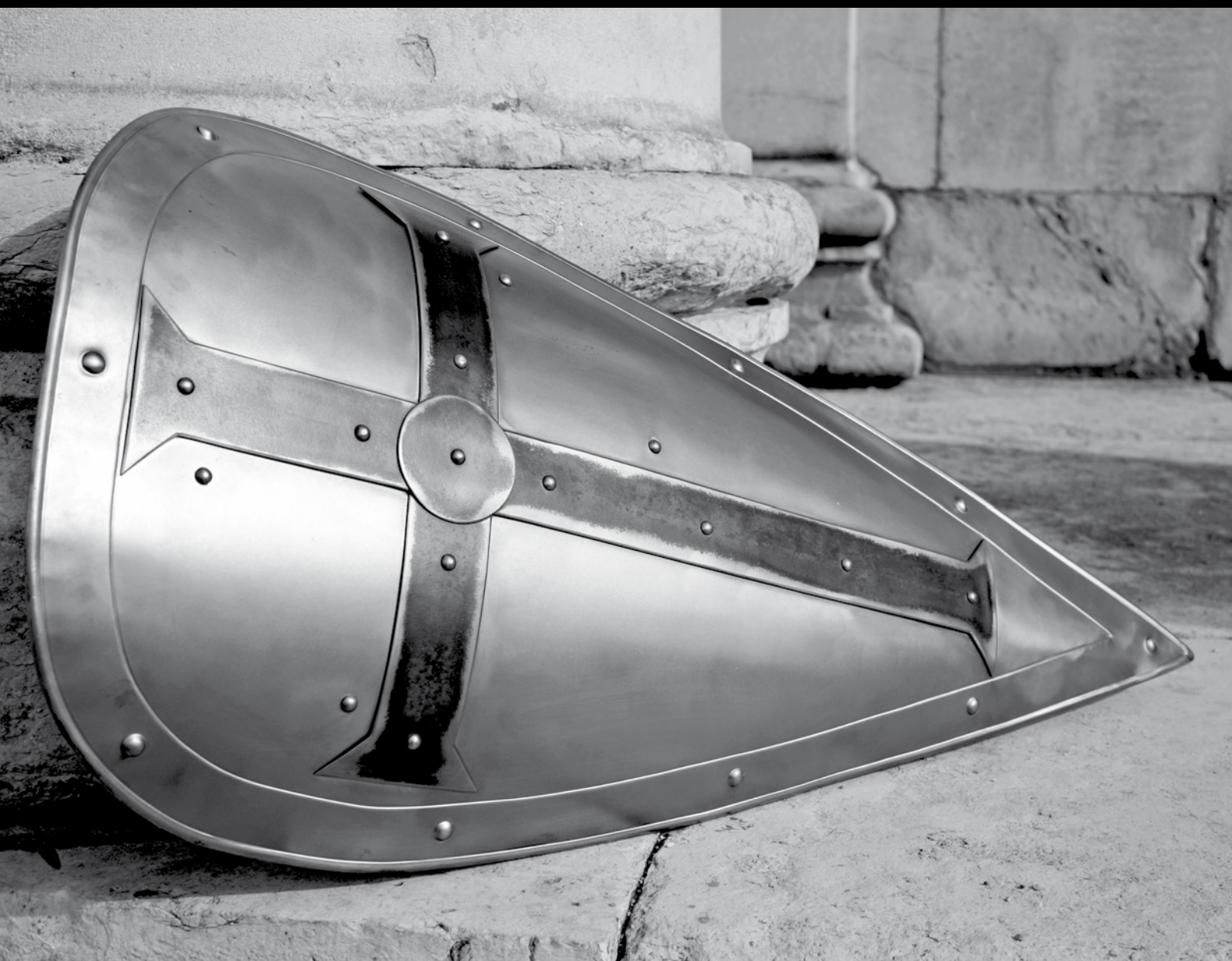


Get Faith out of Government



The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

“To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.”

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Articles express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

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Annual subscriptions are £30. Cheques payable to The Inquirer.

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £70 plus VAT.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

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Inquiring Words

Spirit of Life and Hope

Spirit of life and hope, we turn our minds and hearts again toward thee. Awaken us again to the mysteries that humble us, the realities that orient us, the truths that judge and guide us, the beauty that informs and ravishes us, the love that nurtures us, the fellowship that sustains us, the creativity that heightens and deepens and reorders our living, that we may give ourselves in honesty and openness to the larger life before us. Amen.

– Clarke Dewey Wells

What are we all worth?

In her devotions at the annual meetings, Hilda Dumpleton offered an assessment of the General Assembly which only a maths teacher could.

Aren't our GA meetings something special? I think so and when I was wondering why they were so special I came to the conclusion that it was to do with people. You and me and everyone else. All those volunteers that we have been celebrating throughout the weekend. People, not computers, not machines, not robots, people. It is the people that give the value to the GA Meetings

But I am a maths teacher and, as such, I always like to put an 'x' or a number on things and I wondered whether I could attach a number to the value of the people here today. Well I calculated that between us there was enough iron for a packet of nails, enough fat to make 700 bars of soap, enough sugar to sweeten all those Welsh cakes that were eaten yesterday, enough phosphorous to make 8000 matches and a pinch each of magnesium, potassium and sulphur. Total market value about £450. Is that all we Unitarians are worth? No. we are people. We are not robots. We can be tall, fat, funny, miserable. We have personality, we have characteristics. We can be loving and loveable. We care. We are like a big family, we care for each other, we care for our communities, and we care for our world. But what is as important is that we should also care for ourselves. Let us be what we are as best as we can.

In the words of Donald Johnson:

'No one is perfect

No one is better or worse than another for no one has lived the life of the other

Let belief, doubts, pride and humility and the inescapability of self sit side by side in mutual and self respect

Until there comes the feeling that in the depth of understanding

We are one.

We are one going forward.'

Divine Spirit

We pray that we might live our lives with greater integrity and effectiveness

Help us to enjoy the knowledge that we can play a part in helping people to flourish.

Let us recognise the love of those who care about us

And let us give thanks for the privilege of being present in this place at this time.

Amen

Correction

Louise Rogers, who wrote about congregation trustees' training in the 14 May issue, is a member of the Newcastle-under-Lyme congregation.



Conquering in the name of Christ. Armies bolted crosses to their shields and fought in Jesus' name as illustrated on the Bayeux Tapestry.

Stop faith-based discrimination

It's time that the government stops favouring one faith above all others. Separate church and state, for good, says **Stephen Lingwood**

Interfaith work is clearly important to many Unitarians. It is important to my congregation, Bank Street Unitarian Chapel, Bolton. Some of the earliest meetings of what is now the Bolton Interfaith Council took part at Bank Street, and we have recently identified interfaith work as one of the core aspects of our mission and vision for the next five years.

But the trouble, of course, with a lot of what passes for interfaith work is that it can be very tepid. It can be a lot of already liberal, pluralist people getting together, talking a little bit about their beliefs and practices, having a cup of tea, then going home.

The problem can be that we are not brave enough to have the really important conversations; the really important conversations about the pressing issues of faith and society today. Those issues include religious-based violence, poverty, discrimination, government policies, education, and the over-arching issue of the place of faith in our society.

I think we need to be mature enough to have these more difficult conversations.

There are many things to talk about. In Western society there are many worrying signs of religious discrimination. Last year Switzerland passed a referendum that banned the building of

minarets (the towers of mosques). I find that utterly shocking. Every time I drive from my home to Bank Street Chapel I see the minaret of a mosque at the end of my road. I find it quite beautiful, especially when there's a sunset behind it. But that's hardly the point. To ban a particular religious building is an attack on religious freedom and an encouragement of religious hatred. We can see this in the fact that one mosque (without a minaret) in Geneva was vandalised three times during the referendum campaign.

Religious discrimination grows

France banned the full Islamic veil. And, here in the UK, last year one MP tried to introduce a similar ban.

Now never mind religion, forget religion. This is a basic issue of freedom. Whatever your personal feelings about someone wearing a full veil, the question is; do we really want to live in a country where the government tells us what we can and cannot wear?

Often, debates about such things assert things like 'French values' or 'British values'. And then it gets very complicated because we start talking about doing such things in the name of a 'secular society' or in the name of a 'Christian society'.

And then there are cases such as the British Airways employee who was disciplined in her job for wearing a small Christian cross around her neck. This has led some Christians in this society to talk about 'discrimination' against Christians.

But equally such language of 'discrimination against Christians' is also used to defend bed & breakfast owners who want to discriminate against gay people in their businesses, and

(Continued on next page)

Christianity is no longer representative

(Continued from previous page)

civil registrars who refuse to perform same-sex civil partnerships. This kind of language is also used to defend state-funded Christian schools discriminating against non-Christians in their admissions. And so we find ourselves in a bit of a mire.

All these questions of faith and society can be boiled down to one question: what kind of society do we want to live in? What I would suggest is that dissenting Christian tradition offers some insights into these issues. I'm talking about traditions such as the Anabaptists, Quakers and also us Unitarians. All these traditions have historically believed in independent churches, and a secular society.

Now 'secular' is a difficult word. For some it's a word that suggests something fundamentally anti-religious. But I would suggest it need not mean that at all. Put simply a 'secular society' is one where no religious or non-religious group is privileged and where all groups are free to practice their faith and contribute to the public good.

This is a vision of the secular society long held by Unitarians, and of course enshrined in the constitution of the United States by the many Unitarians who contributed to the American Constitution. Thomas Jefferson, a man deeply influenced by Unitarianism wrote a letter to Baptists in Danbury in 1802. In it he reassured them that he believed in the separation of church and state. He wrote that he believed that 'religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, [and] that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions.' He therefore believed it was necessary to build 'a wall of separation between Church and State.' (See: <http://1.usa.gov/aOCxf> or <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>).

It's worth noting that Baptists in those days were very much in favour of such a separation as they knew that in such a society they would be free to practise their faith without fear of persecution. Many American Baptists have since forgotten this part of their history.

Only Iran enshrines faith more highly

In British society that separation never happened and although dissenters and religious minorities have slowly got more rights, we are still second only to Iran in having religion so firmly established in our constitution.

We are the only country in the world to have bishops sitting as a matter of right in our legislature. There are 26 bishops in the House of Lords, and their votes do make a difference in some debates. Unelected bishops, representing only one faith, only one denomination, voting in our Parliament. It constantly surprises me that we put up with this. We should be offended that one faith is privileged like this, and we should be campaigning against it. Bishops in the House of Lords, is an affront to the vision of a secular society.

Of course such arguments often get dismissed as an 'aggressive

secularism.' But I believe in such disestablishment – not because of a political agenda – but because of the teaching of Jesus. Jesus was someone who lived in the margins, he existed in an occupied territory on the edge of Empire. He didn't preach to kings or emperors, or politicians, but to ordinary people.

The images Jesus uses in his parables: those of the mustard seed, salt, yeast, these suggest that the difference is made by minorities working at the margins. Yeast is a minority ingredient in bread, an impure ingredient from a Jewish point of view, yet something that has a huge impact – it causes the bread to rise. Jesus never expected his followers to be anything other than a minority at the edges of society, and that's exactly what the first generations of Christians were.

But when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the favoured religion of the empire, the margins were dragged to the centre, and the Way of Christ became corrupted as never before. Where previously it had been a persecuted

minority, now it persecuted others. Where before it had given money to the poor, now it built huge basilicas. Where before it had resisted war and violence, now soldiers painted crosses on their shields and conquered in the name of Christ.

Christianity lost its way

And Constantine called a Church Council in a place called Nicaea. And what did they discuss at this council? Did they ask the question: how can we stay faithful now as the favoured religion? How can we make sure we are not corrupted by Empire? Those pressing questions? No, they discussed whether Christ was homo-ousios or homoi-ousios with the Father. (Same-substance or similar-substance, whatever that means) Theological niceties. So Christianity became distracted by dogma, and increasingly lost as a way of life.

And so we have bishops in Parliament as a hang-over of that Constantinian corruption of the church; a hang-over from what we might call Christendom: when church and state and culture were aligned.

But Christendom is now breaking down, and we find ourselves in a strange new world. Some despair at this, but I would suggest it offers fresh new opportunities. As the religious landscape becomes more diverse, and all religions become minorities it is increasingly difficult for religion to be aligned with state power. This gives us an opportunity to be a radical presence at the margins, to offer an alternative way of being: a way that resists the normalising of violence, and the lie that more stuff will make us happier; and a way that offers a prophetic challenge and a voice of conscience to the state.

Martin Luther King said it better than me, 'The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.'

Stephen Lingwood is minister at Bolton Bank Street.

Illustration: Michal Zacharzewski



Unelected bishops, representing only one faith, only one denomination, voting in our Parliament. It constantly surprises me that we put up with this.