

Exploring links between Unitarians and liberal Catholics

By Adrian Worsfold

On Sunday, 17th July, The Hull Unitarian Church holds an 'Open Pulpit' service that is, in effect, an ecumenical or inter-faith service. Bishop elect Mhoria Lauer-Patterson of the Liberal Catholic Apostolic Church will be leading worship. She is based near York. The possibility exists of a closer working relationship with her



and, by extension, this very small Liberal Catholic-type Church currently led by Bishop Adrian Glover located in Bournemouth.

I have known about the Liberal Catholic Apostolic Church since its birth, and indeed about its immediate forerunner. It connects liberalism and Catholicism, different from and yet overlapping with liberalism and Protestantism that is the evolved identity of Unitarians. The connections between Unitarianism and Liberal Catholicism are not well understood. Liberal Catholicism here means a specific type of Church that has existed since the early twentieth century.

Unitarian identity is formed from across the Protestant spectrum, coming from Bible only trinitarian Calvinists, who evolved into Arminians, sometimes Arians, and whose congregations were 'captured' by ideological biblical Unitarians, to become later (in a divided movement) mainly broader based biblical critics and then liberal individualists.

The later broader-based grouping was influenced by the Romantic movement, the Victorian mind that changed the understanding of the rural from danger to one of idealised beauty into the past. Assisted further by the invented tradition of the Oxford Movement as it later reached nonconformity, it allowed some Unitarians to think of themselves as broad Church, almost like Anglicans, in a way that had not been considered since Puritans were Anglicans. So non-conformist churches, like the one in Hull's Park

Street from 1886 until 1976, had steeples and enhanced church-like appearances instead of remaining as simple plain meeting houses.

Romanticism became Catholicism

A few Unitarians took this romanticism to the point where Protestantism became Catholic. One minister, Joseph Lloyd Thomas, advocated a Free Catholicism of symbolism without credal restriction, and joined up with the Congregationalist William Edwin Orchard. Their movement became somewhat contradictory, and Orchard became Roman Catholic in 1932. Lloyd Thomas, president of the Society of Free Catholics represented that Unitarianism which was already anti-denominational, like Martineau's, and he delayed Birmingham New Meeting from joining the new united General Assembly in 1928. Lloyd Thomas went into education and obscurity after the end of Free Catholicism.

One recent group was inspired by this history. In 1999 two non-conformists and a semi-detached Unitarian, the Rev. Stephen Callander formed the British Liberal Free Church, and this became the Society of the Divine Spirit and then the English Liberal Free Church. It was in 2006 that Rev. Stephen Callander left and the remaining two took on episcopal ordination as bishops, and from January 2007 formed The Liberal Rite (when it came to my attention). The Ancient Catholic Church, at one time with many congregations in London, became somewhat spiritualist and later died off. It was then absorbed and the Liberal Rite became the Liberal Catholic Apostolic Church (LCAC), and at transition the ex-Unitarian Alistair Bate became a bishop. He had been a student for the ministry at Unitarian College Manchester and a lay leader at Glasgow; he became a priest in the Open Episcopal Church and with Professor Elizabeth Stuart of Winchester, he was in the Apostolic Society of St. Brigid of Kildare that facilitated the jump to the Liberal Catholic Church International, and then he transferred alone to the Liberal Rite and LCAC. The LCAC represented an enhanced Catholicism from The Liberal Rite, and the two founders and he left the LCAC to become even more Catholic and esoteric in another new creation, the Church of the Divine Mysteries. The LCAC that remained has, arguably, become more liberal and socially inclusive. Mhoira Lauer-Patterson, based in

York, joined the LCAC at the time of its transition; she says that Alistair Bate regarded her as "too modern".

Inspired by Lloyd Thomas, the LCAC nevertheless derives its pattern from the Liberal Catholic Church originating around 1916 that had links with Theosophy and connection with the Hindu sage Krishnamurti for a time. This group derived from the failed Old Catholic mission into England under Arnold Harris Mathew (1852-1919) (who lapsed into occasional Unitarianism from Roman Catholicism). From the very beginning, Mathew's Old Catholic Church, derived from the original Dutch Old Catholics into Europe, was a clergy-led grouping, and this clergy-led approach has continued since. Intellectual liberality has been combined with a sense of the esoteric.

A core, simple Christianity

A third history is that of the Unitarian ministry family, the Herfords. Ulric Vernon Herford (1866-1938), after starting at Manchester but training subsequently in Oxford and picking up its anti-denominational spirit, had two ordinary ministries and then he wanted "sacraments of grace for the heart and will, and sermons for the intellect". Many Unitarians at this time believed that there was a core, simple Christianity; he saw this as achievable ecumenically and by sharing the same second ordinations. He approached what he considered the most primitive of Churches in India and became ordained himself as [page 7 follows] bishop by travelling there (he was later reordained as bishop too). Although this was a neo-Nestorian Church in India, Herford hardly changed his theology and never adopted its two natures two persons belief in Christ. Herford, or Mar Jacobus, was a strong defender of animal welfare and seen as living simply and spiritually sound if naive in his ecclesiastical outlook. He was liturgically rich but his own doxologies for his Evangelical Catholic Church were Arian at best and the trinitarian blessing given at his (Anglican) wife's funeral in 1928 annoyed him as he explained that he was a Unitarian. Herford gave continuous support to W. E. Orchard's King's Weigh House, ordaining Orchard, and ordaining and reordaining many priests there (but not Lloyd Thomas), as well as providing liturgical material and visiting. His one consecration has led

to many further bishops, and the British Orthodox Church rely on in part and uphold the validity of his orders.

So, dotted around the world are small, clergy-led, liberal and other groupings. They often provide rites of passage ministries and develop a few congregations. For example, Alistair Bate runs regular meetings in Edinburgh. There is a newer LCAC congregation in Swindon. Nevertheless, numbers are small and fluid. The most extreme group in this model is The Young Rite, mainly in continental Europe, where the priesthood of all believers means that anyone will be ordained as a priest.

Four Unitarian Bishops

Consider that there are at least four Unitarian bishops! There are two Superintendants for Hungary and Romania, then Bishop Carlton Pearson from the charismatic movement in the United States who joined the Unitarian Universalists and then Bishop Patrick Magara, a Unitarian biblical literalist from the Seventh Day Adventist tradition in Kenya and one might add his son from one wife Theresa overseeing other congregations (his second wife Alice leads a congregation).

Then there is the Unitarian minister in Norway, who is a Superintendent Pastor Knut Heidelberg and his Bét Dávid Unitarian Association modelled on central European doctrinal Unitarianism where there is no room for atheism or other faiths: Jesus pointed to one God, he says. He was ordained in Hungary in 2008 with a sermon that emphasised the non-apostolic nature of Unitarian bishops! Knut Heidelberg moves freely around Scandinavia in supporting occasional and small congregations.

He is connected with the Rev. Maurisa Brown (USA), Senior Pastor of Unitarian Ministries International and she is a Messianic Unitarian - not in the UUA! Again she is biblical in orientation. Some of her ordained individuals are members of the Unitarian Christian Association.

So, Mhoira Lauer-Patterson is taking a service in Hull in July. After training with Anglicans, but frustrated by their attitudes including regarding her age, she was ordained in Australia independently and changed Churches on coming back to the UK. The range of belief in the LCAC is from Unitarian to Trinitarian.

I suggest that the two largest of these 'Independent Sacramental Ministries' in the future will be the LCAC and the Open Episcopal Church (OEC), the latter built by the ex-Anglican Bishop Jonathan Blake and again promoting social inclusion. Although it reads the Nicene creed some of its priests are magical and Sea of Faith radical in theology.

My own view is that Unitarians and LCAC are distinct. We are low liberals and will be so even if becoming more symbolic, postmodern and absorbing more neo-Pagan romanticism. Unitarians are lay led, congregationalist and have largely dropped Eucharistic practice. But that does not prevent the liberal religious associating together. The religious landscape is shifting at present, and independence is growing.

I knew about Free Catholics when at Unitarian College. I first learnt about Liberal Catholics when asked to present a paper a few years ago [2007] to Sea of Faith Yorkshire on why liberal groups do not co-operate with each other. I rather wish they did and hope they do.

Adrian Worsfold lives in Sutton-on-Hull, Hull.

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The Inquirer article is in two columns per page

Since this article was written there have been several developments to be noted briefly.

Bishop Patrick Magara, a biblical literalist from the Seventh Day Adventist tradition in Kenya is no longer associated with Unitarianism.

Critical of the General Assembly ministry appointing processes, Mhoira Lauer-Patterson attempted to become Minister at Mill Hill Leeds. She joined Rev. Maurisa Brown's (USA) Unitarian Ministries International, which I gather no longer exists as it did. She also left the Liberal Catholic Apostolic Church that subsequently renamed itself the Old Catholic Apostolic Church.

Leeds eventually rejected this attempt at shortcut ministerial appointment and effectively M L-P was self-excluded from Unitarianism. She joined the Arian Catholic Church, briefly, based in Hull, which, apparently, despite her being a bishop, doesn't accept ordained women. As a Zionist, she was last heard attempting to become a rabbi.

The alternative could have been so different. She might have used Park Street, say, to run her own meetings and develop her own Church. She might have developed ecumenical relations reviving the Liberal Catholic link. As it was, it's fair comment to say her eyes widened at the sight of gothic Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds and she became 'greedy' to get herself (bishop and) minister there. I had been over-optimistic.

The LCAC loss (including its one effective parish at Swindon around the same time) is evidence that these tiny Churches are smaller than the personalities in them. The experience of losses from the Open Episcopal Church in 2014 again is evidence of the fracturing nature of Liberal Catholicism.