

Both Here, and Beyond

Stephen Lingwood, *Seeking Paradise: A Unitarian Mission For Our Times*, Lindsey Press, London 2020, pp 142, ISBN 978-085319-094-3. £10.00 pbk.

The Lindsey Press are to be congratulated on bringing out the most important book of Unitarian theology in Britain for more than 50 years – it could be argued for 75 years, since *A Free Religious Faith* was published in 1945.

What gives this new book *Seeking Paradise: A Unitarian Mission For Our Times* its particular weight, is that it's a work of systematic theology (in creating a comprehensive framework for understanding Unitarian thought), while also giving practical theological pointers to a future that British Unitarians could move to.

One of the most innovative sections is when the author, Stephen Lingwood, asks what a Unitarian version of salvation could be. He considers possible goals for Unitarian communities to aspire to – the 'kindom of God' (not kingdom, but 'kindom' to emphasise equalities of status and gender), Beloved Community or finally, Paradise. But these are not three varieties to choose from ... rather they are different terms for an end-point. Each term has value, but the author finally chooses 'Seeking Paradise', as capturing best the idea Jesus kept alluding to: that although 'the Kingdom of God' may be beyond, it keeps breaking into the present (so paradise is both 'here' and 'beyond').

A delightful, if rare, example of Unitarians placing paradise at the centre of worship is found at Golders Green Unitarian church in North London, where a mural by the English landscape painter Ivon Hitchens ('Forest Scene') is displayed around the front apse (a photograph of part of this paradisaical scene appears on this book's front cover).

This is a bold and challenging work, and it remains to be seen whether the solutions proposed – arrived at through careful and detailed reasoning – will be acceptable to British Unitarians. Lingwood's central argument – that the denomination needs to recover key elements of 'classical Unitarianism' if it is to move forward – will prove controversial in a denomination that has increasingly seen itself as 'post-Christian'. And yes, the author makes clear, the 'classical Unitarianism' he refers to is rooted in the liberal Christian tradition.

But why recover this tradition? ... well, that's where the arguments become interesting.

The book begins with the 2006 Unitarian Annual Meetings in Britain, where a motion was overwhelmingly approved stressing the 'absolute need for numerical growth' if the denomination was to survive. Promoting numerical growth became a central mantra, yet, the author observes, there was little examination of why such growth might be a good thing (other than for self-preservation).

Yet if Unitarians are to grow, the author asks, surely they need an understanding of the why? ... in fact, of mission, a theology of mission. Where better to look for this than the (oft-forgotten) history of Unitarian mission work? The book provides a useful resume here, from the early missionary pioneer Richard Wright, who travelled the country in the early 19th

Century preaching a simple Unitarian Christianity, to the Mission to India (which led indirectly to the formation of the liberal Hindu Brahmo Samaj), to Domestic Missions to poorer areas of Britain (mainly urban), and finally to the short-lived 'Van Missions' of the early twentieth Century.

In pursuing these activities, Unitarians saw themselves as part of the liberal Christian tradition, certainly as a distinctive part of this tradition, but this is the theology (including the stories and scripture) they promoted (although as the author notes, they did so with less and less confidence as time went on).

So to the modern period ... and the question once again ... if British Unitarians want to grow, why? ... what is their greater purpose? ... what good news do they bring? And what philosophy of life, what theology, lies behind their desire? Yet, Stephen Lingwood states, as modern Unitarianism has distanced itself from Christianity, it has been left with no language through which to promote its faith.

So could Christianity still help? The author examines 'theologies of mission' in mainstream Christianity (and other religions) to see whether these could apply in the modern Unitarian context. And there are two fundamentals – to promote 'the truth' and secondly, to offer a way of 'salvation' through faith. Both these may be deeply problematic from a Unitarian viewpoint, but could they help?

The book then explores how these could be understood in a Unitarian context – and while in Unitarianism (and liberal theology generally) revelation is not sealed, truth and truths will always be provisional. But what provisional truths can Unitarians offer?

Salvation seems at first sight to offer even more difficulty in this context, with its connotations of the after-life ... but, the author shows, even in evangelical churches, members talk nowadays of salvation (being saved) in 'this-world' terms – how their faith turned their life around, helped them find a partner, or overcome health or psychological problems. So what sort of healing faith could Unitarians offer? And do we humans need healing, aren't we '*pretty darn good*' already?

Well firstly, faith is essential for living ... we all need it ... as Emerson said, 'have no doubt humans will always worship something' ... and above all perhaps, we humans need hope and meaning in order to live. So can Unitarians offer meaning and purpose to life?.

To answer this question, the author feels he has to 'clear the ground' by confronting key assumptions and 'orthodoxies' of modern Unitarianism (particularly in the UK). What are these? Well firstly, that truth can be arrived at outside of a tradition. But, the book makes clear, modern philosophy and linguistics have demonstrated that each of us is inescapably part of a tradition, which shapes our thoughts and beliefs. (Yet we should understand tradition as more of an 'extended argument' than a 'straitjacket').

A second Unitarian orthodoxy, that human nature is essentially good (which mainly renders the need for salvation unnecessary, even 'this-world' salvation). But says Stephen Lingwood, humans do not perfectly reflect the divine ... and there is an urgent need for a Unitarian anthropology which recognises the ambiguities of human nature and its tragic realities. Humanity's problems cannot be solved by technology or societal re-organisation alone ... these require a theological response.

Thirdly, the author confronts 'Pluralism' ... the idea that because we each have our own beliefs, no common belief or theology is possible. But this highly-individualistic stance mitigates against any form of religious community. Aside from it being philosophically dubious, pluralism raises the question of why one should not rather pursue a lone spiritual journey.

Finally, 'Unbelief' is considered. Modern Unitarianism in the UK has largely drifted away from its Object, which expresses its denominational purpose as: 'the worship of God ... the celebration of life ... and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition'. Instead, agnosticism and even atheism have become the norm today.

Yet, the author asserts, the issue of God cannot be avoided. While Unitarians (and liberal believers generally) are always likely to be agnostic to a degree, we surely also need a faith in something beyond ourselves. The author quotes the Quaker Derek Guiton, who proposed that members of his faith community should at least be '*open to the possibility of transcendence*' (or of a transcendent reality). Stephen Lingwood goes on to suggest, again citing Guiton, that if we understand God as Love, we need also to at least be '*open to the possibility of a personal God*'.

Lingwood suggests churches that are growing are those that tell people God loves them, while those that are declining, do not (and he cites evidence for this). The author goes on to quote the Unitarian minister Art Lester, who said modern Unitarians too often try to worship an idea. But, Art Lester continued: 'You can't worship an idea. You can't fall to your knees before an opinion, and you can't find yourself weeping with pity and love over a finely-tuned philosophic argument.' Art Lester went on to suggest the reasons for Unitarian numerical decline might be expressed in a single question: *Are we nourishing the soul?*

The book concludes by considering Unitarian evangelism, whether it can be done. Again this could be controversial, but Stephen Lingwood argues Unitarians can indeed undertake evangelism if they approach others in an honest and respectful way – above all, through dialogue. Different types of evangelism are evaluated, with Stephen Lingwood 'modelling' the kinds of dialogue needed for a new Unitarian evangelism.

This should be a very valuable book for Unitarians, Quakers and religious liberals generally (whether Christian or not). It will repay serious study, by individuals and groups. Although the ideas are at times complex, the style is clear and largely accessible. The book is well-structured, and each chapter ends with questions to consider, making it ideal for group discussion.

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* 'Seeking Paradise' can be ordered directly from Unitarian headquarters at: Essex Hall, 1 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY, United Kingdom. Card payments can be made by phoning Essex Hall (during office hours) on: + 44 (0) 20 7240 2384.