

Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship

SERMON: Sunday 30 August 2015

**The Flaming Chalice in the Twentieth Century:
Our Symbol and Its Story, Part 2**

Two weeks ago, on 16 August, I related the story of Jan Hus, the Catholic priest born in Czechoslovakia in 1369 who became Rector of the University of Prague and University Preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel. His story is the first part of the story of our Unitarian symbol, the Flaming Chalice, and I begin today with a brief summary of Hus's life and legacy.

He upset the foreign-dominated university administration by supporting the move to restore control of the university to the Czech people.

He upset the hierarchy of the corrupt and schismatic Catholic Church by preaching in the Czech language of the people rather than the Latin language of the Church; by preaching about things that concerned the people in his congregation rather than about dreary details of dogma; and by openly criticising the corruption which was rife in the priesthood and in the Church generally.

He taught that the communion wine and bread did not magically change into the blood and body of Christ, but that communion was essentially a symbolic memorial meal.

He had the communion chalice passed around among the people as a symbol of fellowship and of his view that every person was the equal of the priest. In so doing he returned to the old Eastern rite of sharing the bread and wine, before the Roman Church had taken over.

His books were among those which were banned by Rome because of their criticisms, and he was declared to be excommunicated.

Having been the subject of a papal edict that, if he did not stop preaching, all the clergy in Prague would be executed, he went into exile rather than provoke that sort of bloodshed.

In 1414 he was offered "safe conduct" so that he could attend the great Church Council of Constance, but he was forced to accept the offer by the threat that, if he refused, the papal authorities would send an armed force to attack the place of his exile.

Immediately on arrival in Constance he was arrested, taken to a dungeon and chained hands and feet to a wall. He was not given any opportunity to offer any reasoned argument for his position before any of the committees of the Council of Constance, but was tried by a kangaroo court where some of his accusers and judges were some of

the foreign teachers who had been forced out of Prague University years earlier by the self-determination policies supported by Hus as Rector of the University.

He was condemned, and burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1415, so this year marks the 600th anniversary of his death.

In a pun on his own name - Hus means "goose" - he declared: "Today you are burning a goose, but out of my ashes will be born a swan whom you cannot burn."

His followers adopted the chalice and flame as a badge by which they could recognise each other, and today we Unitarians can recognise our own kinship with him.

Hus's death touched off widespread revolts. The king who betrayed him was deposed; the Church was forced to allow everyone in the congregation to share the chalice as part of the communion.

For two centuries the Czechs enjoyed a measure of liberty, but in 1620 their country was conquered by the Austrians. Although by then Czechoslovakia was mostly Protestant, Roman Catholicism was made the state religion.

There followed three centuries of heavy oppression, which continued until the break-up of the Austrian Empire during the Great War of 1914-1918.

That leads into the story of Norbert Capek, who was born in 1870 and who disliked the Catholic faith of his family. He became a Baptist - a Bible salesman and a missionary preacher - and started a magazine in which he featured articles on psychology and science. He was alert to all the political and intellectual issues of the day and, like Jan Hus five centuries earlier, he insisted that religion must apply to life.

Capek was raided by the police more than once, and eventually - again like Hus - he decided that he should leave, to avoid placing his friends and supporters in danger.

Through his Baptist connections he was able to go abroad, and he ended up in the United States of America, where he and his wife Maja - having become dissatisfied with the Baptist faith - joined the Unitarian Church in East Orange, New Jersey.

Overjoyed to find the kind of faith toward which he had been moving for so long, Capek became a missionary again.

When the Great War was over and the new Czech nation had been launched, he was sent by the American Unitarian Association as a Unitarian missionary to Prague.

The Czech people had never heard of this "new" religion, but they listened eagerly to the message as Capek had believed they would, and eventually the Capeks built their own place, called "Unitaria".

Because the congregation had people of many backgrounds, most of them rebelling against religious orthodoxies and dogmatism, Capek kept things simple - but he felt the need for a symbolic ritual that would bind the people together, in which everyone could participate without reservation. So he conceived the Flower Communion, and that story deserves a whole service to itself.

A few years of growth and prosperity were followed by the difficulties of the Great Depression, and then came Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia. As a public figure known for his support of liberalism, Capek was in trouble. Eventually - inevitably - he was arrested and all his papers were seized. In keeping with the bizarre lunacy of Nazism, this patriotic Czech was charged with treason. For some reason he was released, but then the Czech Resistance assassinated the chief local Nazi.

In retaliation, Capek was arrested and sent off to Dachau, his papers marked "Return unwanted".

He was a doomed man, and one day in 1942, as part of their "experiments" the guards injected him with a lethal poison - pus!

Norbert Capek embodied the words of Jan Hus:

God needs people who will
Seek the truth,
Listen to the truth,
Teach the truth,
Abide by the truth,
And defend the truth
Even unto death.

The Nazis and the horrors they brought to Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and the legacy of Norbert Capek and his Flower Communion, provide a link to Part 2 of the story of our symbol of the Flaming Chalice in the twentieth century.

In 1939 a small group of Unitarians in the USA decided that they had to give public witness to their convictions regarding human dignity and service to others.

They formed the Unitarian Service Committee, similar in dedication and principles to the American Friends Service Committee - the Quakers. They were particularly concerned with helping refugees escaping the horrors of Nazi Germany from various war-torn European countries.

An Austrian refugee, Hans Deutsch, lived in Paris until France was invaded in 1940. He then went to Portugal, where he joined the staff of the Unitarian Service Committee for six months as secretary and assistant to its Executive Director, Dr Charles R Joy.

It had become apparent that some kind of seal, emblem or badge was needed, to bridge the language gap and help to identify the USC workers to the refugees.

Hans Deutsch was an artist and draftsman, as well as a musician, and Dr Joy asked him to design an appropriate emblem for the USC.

And so, the Flaming Chalice came into being, as a symbol which is now recognised throughout many countries as the emblem of Unitarianism - or Unitarian Universalism - since the merger of those two traditions in 1961.

The symbol is usually referred to as the "Flaming Chalice", but the adjective upsets some people because it

sounds like a swear word, making it somewhat undignified and even comic. They don't want to have an expletive describing the chalice. It is a bit like the popular morning hymn "O Life that maketh all things new - the blooming earth, the thoughts of men". "The blooming earth" sounds like an expletive, and in a more modern hymn book it has been altered to "the flowers of earth".

I am not aware of any record to indicate that Hans Deutsch was familiar with the story of Jan Hus and the use of a flaming chalice by his followers as a badge. Nor am I aware of any record to indicate that he was familiar with the story of Norbert Capek, as a contemporary Unitarian in Czechoslovakia. However, he used familiar elements which would be easily recognised, but which could be interpreted according to the various religious or cultural backgrounds of the refugees, of the USC members themselves, and of other people working with the USC members.

The chalice: It is a sacred symbol for many religions. It reflects the virtue of sharing with everyone the contents of a common cup.

The oil: Oil is set aside amongst the elements of the earth as a healing and binding force. "Thou anointest my head with oil".

The flame: Fire - the flame - signifies transcendence, and the triumph of truth over superstition and fear, of light over darkness. It also offers a silent invitation to share in the warmth of fellowship.

The shape: The flame above the chalice suggests the form of a cross, as a reminder of our roots in the Christian tradition.

The circle: Sometimes a circle is used to enclose both the flame and the chalice, and becomes a poignant declaration that all the earth and its inhabitants are one.

The Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association merged in 1961, and their respective Service Committees also merged. In 1963 Joe Stoeltje re-designed the emblem, moving the Flaming Chalice to the left (Was that a deliberate decision, to go the left rather than the right?) within two coinciding and overlapping circles.

Then in 1973 a new design of the flaming chalice logo, by Boston art student Hrair Vartanian, was adopted by the UU Service Committee.

Other symbols and variants have been used by Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist groups. The circle, with an off-centre cross, was used in the 1940s by a group of Universalist ministers - mostly members of a group called the "Humiliati" - who wished to emphasise a more universal philosophy in contrast to the exclusively Christian-oriented character of Universalism.

The cross was placed to one side of the circle to acknowledge the belief that no single symbol, form or expression was entitled to **the** place as **the** central or only vehicle for the universal spirit, because there was room within the circle for all of humankind's expressions of faith.

In 1948 a member of the "Humiliati" visited England, and discovered with some surprise that the Rev Arthur Peacock had used the same symbol in the Universalist Church in London, almost half a century before it had first been used in America.

The circle and off-centre cross was used extensively by many Universalist churches as the symbol of the "New Universalism", which wanted to get away from partialisms and parochialisms of all kinds. It can still be found in some Universalist churches, and it is used in various ways by people who continue to recognise and respect its

unique spiritual and symbolic message. Some groups, particularly those with a Unitarian Universalist background rather than a Universalist history, have replaced the cross with a flaming chalice, but still usually placed off-centre. Sometimes two coinciding and overlapping circles are used, to represent the two traditions which merged in 1961.

Just as there are many variants and forms of the cross or crucifix used on Christian churches, in Christian art, and by individual Christians, so there are numerous variants of our Flaming Chalice.

In Britain what was often called the "chunky chalice" was adopted by one person who was in charge of General Assembly publications in the 1960s. It was the one with which I was first familiar, and I used it on the letterhead paper of the Sydney Unitarian Church and then the Australian and New Zealand Unitarian Association. The Canadian Unitarians put it within a maple leaf.

However, some people considered the "chunky chalice" to be undignified and uninspiring. One problem was that at the same time as the chunky chalice appeared, the British Gas Board adopted a little chap with a similar flame as its symbol and called it "Mr Therm".

All right for a gas board, but perhaps less dignified for a religious organisation.

In the UK John and Dot Hewerdine developed a range of distinctive Blue John jewellery, with the Flaming Chalice motif.

The slender Flaming Chalice of my tie is repeated, enclosed, in my pendant, which I always wear.

One of the major exercises that I regularly set my communication students when I was teaching at Petersham College of TAFE was to get them to prepare an assignment on non-verbal communication - eg flags, road signs, the use of colour, standard international signs such as those used for public toilets - because symbols, like flags or road signs that use no words, form a significant element in every culture but also help to transcend the barriers created by language.

Organisations and communities are often held together more closely by common symbols which represent shared meanings. Various religious and secular emblems throughout the centuries have evoked memories that bind people together in a common view of life and a shared destiny.

Symbols are as much a part of the life of a group as food, shelter and clothing are for the individual.

There is, of course, no such thing as a single "official" symbol for Unitarianism. Each congregation is autonomous, and each congregation is therefore free to choose whatever emblem - if any - it wants to use to identify itself. But, many use one or other version of the Flaming Chalice and it is widely recognised.

At the same time, there are congregations within our denomination who prefer not to use the Flaming Chalice or any type of emblem, on their buildings or on their literature. Abraham Joshua Heschel declared: "What is necessary is not to have a symbol, but to be a symbol."

For those Unitarians who want to use a symbol, the Flaming Chalice is appropriate for several reasons, and it has a proud history, going back six centuries to the Catholic champion of the equality of all people and the freedom of the individual, the Czech Jan Hus; and including the work of the Unitarian Service Committee in war-torn Europe (including Czechoslovakia) in the 20th century. Our debt to that history is expressed in a sonnet by Coral Joyce Randall, "The Flaming Chalice", with which I finish:

Because we take from the pages of the past
Our private faith, a faith that will survive
And triumph just as long as Good shall last,
To influence our mutual, daily lives,
We keep our burning crucible aglow
With flames of freedom (an unfinished task)
Lit by the voices of the long ago
That hid behind no timid, frightened mask.
They set no bounds on love and reason's cause,
Nor blindly followed notions of the mass;
Their chalice flamed for God's unwritten laws
Though they themselves were burned at stake, alas
We take from larger vessels of great souls
Only as much as our small goblet holds.

Geoffrey R Usher