

Oscailt

Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

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Front Cover: The new worship space in Cork Unitarian Church.

(photo M.O'Sullivan)

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Oscailt

Our magazine title, ***Oscailt***, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

The Moral Maze

Decades ago, David Lodge, a British writer received some fame with his novel *How Far Can You Go?* It begged the question what were the limits to the sexual behaviour of English Catholics in the 1950s and 1960s and of course it had huge resonance over here as the perennial query from teenagers, particularly Catholics, was often exactly as in the title, how far can you go? As you may remember, the RC answer was basically that you could not go at all, and if you did you were heading towards an ‘occasion of sin’ which itself was a sin before you could get down to doing any decent sinning. It was all very fraught but while we, perhaps mostly those of us with the bus pass, may be amused now, the question posed by Lodge did a number of things.

It brought humour to one moral question which weighed down many generations. It highlighted that sexual activity is a core human preoccupation which affects all of us at some time in some way or another, and most important it reiterated that, as most people believe, although not everyone, that there are boundaries to how we behave. What these boundaries are has led to much dissension today and over the centuries.

You will notice that we’ve been using the word ‘sin’ but some writers including Richard Holloway in his *Godless Morality, Keeping Religion Out of Ethics*, distinguish between ‘sin’ and ‘immorality’. ‘Sin’ for him is essentially a religious idea, a disobeying of God, who is, in a sense, a father with a strict code for the rearing of children.

‘Sin’ works on obedience rather than consent, expecting adherents to blindly follow what is commanded rather than co-operate with an end that is understood and voluntarily accepted. Indeed, he says, there are passages in the Bible where, in order to test compliance, God orders great wickedness to be performed.

However, even if we believe in the concept of ‘sin’, one that emanates from the religious arena, it is not enough to say that this or that action is wrong and it is wrong because God said it. Just outside a town in the US there is a big sign which says, “It’s in the Bible, God said it, and we believe it.” Even allowing for the view that the

Bible is the word of God, or is inspired by God, it is interesting that as Leslie D. Weatherhead has pointed out in *The Christian Agnostic*, in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus uses the word 'sin' only six times and the verb three times.

But then St Paul, however, made up for this, using 'sin' 91 times, thus, in Weatherhead's view, overburdening the Western world for centuries.

It was Irish missionaries between 600 and 1200 AD who exacerbated our sense of "sin" with penitential books spreading across the Continent. A *New Dictionary of Christian Theology* outlines how interminable species of 'sin' were described for which penances were parcelled out...there were at last 20 forms of homicide, each deserving of a distinct penance.

And, indeed, we can reflect that, up to recent times, children barely out of infancy were taught about "mortal sin". For Catholics part of being "good" meant having to go to Confession, into The Dark Box, the title of John Cornwell's *A Secret History of Confession*, to be quizzed by a white-collared man in a black suit on our "impure thoughts", by a man who had been trained to practice "custody of the eyes", a man subject to being reported on by the "ring of spies" set up by Pius X.

James Joyce, Edna O'Brien, Colm Toibin, Roddy Doyle, John McGahern, and most famously Frank O'Connor have cast an acerbic eye on this Sacrament which perhaps has helped to reduce faithful confessants to a trickle. In the US it is estimated that only two per cent of Catholics go to confession regularly, and I'm sure the percentage here has vastly reduced from the days when the real penance for "sin" was the long wait in the queue for confession rather than the ten Hail Marys penance, and the Hail Holy Queen.

The background, of course, is that the Christian Church inherited its stances from the Ancient Greeks. *Fifty Ideas You Really Need to Know (on Religion)* by Peter Stanford, reminds us that Plato taught that the human body was evil because it distracted from the truth.

Aristotle shared his view that women were inferior to men and were too ready to use sex to distract them from cerebral matters (the *Dail Mail* in England seems to agree), leading on to St. Thomas Aquinas who believed the "state of virginity is preferable to that of even continent marriage".

So, once you start digging, as Holloway says, the whole business of morality becomes more complex in its particularities. Frequently, he says, good moral systems compete and conflict. As Ralph N Helverson writes in *Living in the Questions*, we feel that our principles are unchanging, eternal, but others have principles that disagree with ours.

He refers to people who seem to have no sense of the contraries of life, of the predicaments of human living, the contradictions and the evils that are all mixed up with what we call our good.

There is a place in life, he says, where the “spirit of man is hemmed in by narrow bounds that restrict his humanity”. Montaigne, according to Sarah Bakewell in her *How to Live*, had a cheerful acceptance of whatever happens. “This, she says, was at odds with Christianity which insisted that people must constantly repent. Montaigne knew some of the things he had done in the past made no sense to him and just as he would not think of passing judgment on a room full of acquaintances, all of whom had their own views and reasons to explain what they had done, so he would not think of judging previous versions of Montaigne.”

“We are all a patchwork,” he said, “and so shapeless and diverse in composition, that each bit, each moment, plays its own game.”

Henry David Thoreau made a related point. He said that if someone advances to what he calls virtue, he had better look to his vices. Evil and good proceed apace in life. As one develops, the other one comes alive. The man who assumes he is good, says Thoreau, is already on the way to an inner rot. He has ceased to be sensitive to the corrosions and contradictions of life.

Human beings, Julian Baggini writes in *How the World Thinks*, don’t have to be perfect to be at their wonderful best, citing Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar and Mother Teresa whose halos have been dented in recent times.

“There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behoves any of us, to talk about the rest of us,” is a ditty from childhood which catches that we all have moral weaknesses bubbling along with our virtues.

We have to remember, as Philip Zimbardo, the American psychologist has said, “any deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us under the

right or wrong situational circumstances”.

Susan Neiman, in her *Moral Clarity*, outlines cases where the most abominable actions were accompanied with the insistence that they were honourable. She cites the courage of Voltaire who spent his last years raging about the case of Jean Calas, a Toulouse merchant whose son was found hanged in his father’s shop.

The family described it as murder. This was understandable as people who committed suicide were not only deprived of a church burial but were dragged naked through the streets. Voltaire said the father’s stance was an act of paternal piety. The public disagreed for the Calas family was Huguenot and most French who were Catholic thought Huguenots capable of anything.

Jean Calas, they said, had murdered his son because he was about to convert to Catholicism. They celebrated the son as a martyr, and his father, after a trial in which torture failed to produce even a hint of a confession, or evidence, was broken on a wheel and burnt at the stake.

And within the lifetime of some of us a Wehrmacht soldier said he was proud that he only shot children, “his comrade shot the mothers and I saw the children couldn’t survive without them,” he said. A similar reason was given by Hutu women who murdered the children of their Tutsi neighbours in Rwanda (the same country where the UK now wants to send asylum seekers).

The nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were claimed to be necessary, says Neiman, to save American lives that would have been lost in an invasion of Japan. That, she says, was false because the Japanese were willing to surrender.

So, we church goers, recognising that sometimes, even many times, we don’t live up to ethical or moral standards (our own or ones imposed), or indeed avoid “sin”, how are we supposed to live? We are frequently faced with moral/ethical difficulties: to be topical, what is stopping me hosting a Ukrainian refugee? Is it because the spare room is used for drying clothes and cultivating garden seeds or is it something more understandable?

Was Kant right when he said we are all inclined towards self-deception, endowing ourselves with better motives than the ones that really underlie our actions? Such possible self-deceptions often arise around sexual and reproductive issues.

Adultery is widely condemned, but is it always wrong? A

man is in a vegetative state for 30 years. Is his wife sinning/being immoral if she has a life enhancing affair with his male nurse? Is this not a case of Christian love resting on a fundamental value judgment?

Is a nurse in a nursing home immoral, although she does break a professional code, if she strikes up a mutually beneficial sexual relationship with a retired and dying professional man who had never had sexual experience?

We will have heard, too, about the conundrums of direct and indirect effects that Catholic theology faces over ectopic pregnancies, well described in *The Puzzle of Ethics* by Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch.

How do we feel about young people who have sex with each other whenever they feel like it, the way they might have coffee or a hamburger on a good night out?

Can we morally justify sex as an appetite to be satisfied even if there is no necessary connection to any kind of relationship? Before we answer we might reflect on the words of John Harris, quoted by Holloway, who says that for a moral judgment to hold weight it must have something to say about why a supposed wrong action is wrongful.

Do our moral codes allow for the fact that sexual orientation might change over a long life? So moral/ethical choices are difficult whether our standards come from a religious or secular source.

Indeed, Bernard Williams, the renowned UK philosopher, wrote that it was impossible to codify ethics into convenient moral theories. In terms of how people actually live such a codification was not only unhelpful but impractical.

He said, according to Jeremy Harwood, in *Philosophy: A Beginners Guide to the Ideas of Great Thinkers*, that philosophers had failed to engage with the real moral problems, stripping human life of everything that made it worthwhile through their failure to take account of the importance of individual integrity, the projects central to a person's life, special obligations, and loyalty owed to family and friends.

Perhaps this is unduly pessimistic, but through history humans have wrestled impressively with how we should lead what may be described as the Good Life. And there are varying views and emphasises. Some religions, for example, have laid greater

stress on individual ethics while others emphasise social ethics.

But the Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions (Wordsworth Reference) says that all religions agree that ethics are relevant and necessary. Christians stress general principles of love and service. Jews and Muslims go into detail on the minutiae of ethics, Hindus stress the social ethics of the caste system, and non-violence (as do Buddhists), and Jain monks wear masks and carry a broom to avoid killing insects by swallowing or treading on them.

The Golden Rule, never do to others what you would not want them to do to you, permeates many ethical teachings. Confucians speak of shu or consideration for others, Buddhists say that a person who loves the self should never harm the self of others, Christians are enjoined to treat others as we would like them to treat us and in Judaism, “what is hateful to yourself do not to your fellow man.”

Being Unitarians, we probably take our moral stances from many sources, perhaps with those of our parents’ dominant, however unconsciously. Here are some other suggested ethical/moral insights around which we could build a coherent moral code.

1. We should challenge the extremes. (Joe Humphreys in *The Story of Virtue, Universal Lessons on How to Live* writes about virtue ethics, which is a challenge to extremes, “a mean that lies between two vices” as Aristotle said. Courage, for example, is a valley between cowardice and rashness, modesty between licentiousness and self-pity).

2. By putting others first, we are in fact showing strength not weakness. (What is ethically right is the opposite of self-interest, says Confucius).

3. Moral judgments should depend on the situation confronted. (We should reject words like “never”, “always”, “absolute”. Situation ethics asks what is the best decision to help human beings unlike Natural Law theory which looks to the law which humans are supposed to instinctively know).

4. An action may be “morally good” because the intention is good, but not morally right, it might be a wrong action. (The Puzzle of Ethics)

5. Ritual and moral standards are different concepts. (Too

often cultural ritual obligations have been confused with moral standards says Holloway).

There are, of course, many other standards we could emulate, the need for reverence, that we should seek the happiness of the greatest number of people, and moral codes from religious “revelation” and no doubt there will be many disagreements of which are more appropriate.

I like the story of the US theologian who got into a taxi with what turned out to be a rabid Republican driver. His father, the driver said, and his grandfather before him had voted Republican. I take it, said the theologian, that you will therefore be voting for a Republican president. No, said the driver, there are times that a man has to push his principles aside and do the right thing.

Such are the confusions that many of us can feel when our principles are challenged and when we are caught in the Moral Maze.

Paul Murray

Dublin Unitarian Church

**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for April 2022.**
(Two short Books)

Small Things like These

by

Claire Keegan

(2021)

I found this to be a beautifully written tale of Furlong, married to Eileen and father of five daughters, a hard working Catholic with a successful local coal business . His childhood experience of the kindness of the Protestant Mrs. Dixon, the widowed owner of the local big house was brought to his mind when he discovered Sarah Redmond, a teenage resident/worker hiding overnight in the coal shed of the local convent. Sarah had signs that she had suffered neglect and abuse in the care of the institution and she appealed to him for help.

His benefactor, Mrs. Dixon, had employed his mother and gave her and her son, Furlong (father unidentified), a home and she had provided him with support and guidance throughout his childhood. This story is written with compassion and an understanding of the forces at play in Ireland though the lens of New Ross of the late 1980's shortly after the Kerry Babies scandal of 1984.

Furlong considers the issues of right and wrong and of the teachings and the practice of Christian values in his town and in his own life. As a businessman he depends on the custom of the powerful institutions in the town, Eileen is aware of the requirement 'to ignore certain things' in their society . Mrs. Kehoe warns him 'They are all the one'. His standing in the town and the future education of his children could be jeopardized by his challenging the actions of the convent and the power of the church.

This short novel was a delight to read with accurate and perceptive reflections on the characters' experiences, on the meaning of life, family and Christian morality and on the hypocrisy of shallow pomp, wealth and power in a small community ending in a well crafted revelation of Furlong's paternity,

Convenience Store Woman

by

Keiko Furukama does not experience the world as others do, she has difficulty relating to the emotions she sees others express. From an early age she has felt different and not acceptable because of her very literal approach to the world. When she hears the playground call to ‘stop the boys fighting’, she hits one of them on the head with a shovel a very effective if unduly severe and unacceptable reaction which shocks everyone and marks her as odd.

Keiko knows she is different and seen as ‘unacceptable’ in her family and among her peers and she develops coping mechanisms by keeping silent and by mimicking the fashion and responses of others to negotiate the hurdles of social situations.

In her teens she sees ‘an Aquarium’ which is the newly built glass walled convenience store, built to a universal design with uniformed staff and strict instructions on staff demeanor and responses to customers. The store’s regimented behaviours, responses and clear expectations suit her perfectly and she is happy there for 18 years; she responds to what she calls ‘the music of the store’.

She works hard to survive and has no opportunity to feel fulfilled as her job of 18 years is seen as menial by her peers. She is not following the expected path of boyfriend, marriage and motherhood in contrast to her younger sister and friends.

She meets Shiraha, a selfish lazy narcissistic leech who takes advantage of her need to be seen to have ‘a man in her life’ for the consumption of her family and friends although Keiko has none of the natural appetites for food, for relationship, for intimacy.

Just before attending an interview for a better job which Shiraha has arranged for her she calms her nerves by visiting a nearby convenience store and there she rediscovers her pleasure in this environment. This is an epiphany for her as she decides Shiraha is not for her and she decides to satisfy herself in her choices and not the wishes of those around her.

I found this a sensitive and tenderly told tale of a girl’s search for meaning and respect in a confusing world. The language is simple and direct which matches the style of the main character. I found Convenience Store Woman ‘unputdownable’, a funny and heartrending account of a unique individual trying to make sense of the world and to find her place in it. To find freedom from the judgement of society and the harsh advice and expectations of others who did not understand her. I was taken by the fact that Murata herself works in a Convenience store and I

was reminded of the old adage that there is a place for everyone on this earth.

Marian McCaughley

CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN

by
SAYAKA MURATA

This is the quirky story of Keiko Furukura who is thirty six years old and has worked in the Smile Mart Convenience store at the Hiromachi Station in Tokyo for eighteen years.

Keiko loves the store, she revels in the monotony and the repetitive daily tasks of restocking shelves, setting up promotions and serving the customers at the till. When she started in the store and was given the training manual she said “it was the first time anyone had ever taught me how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech”. She loves her job and is the top worker in the store and she is very happy with her life. She has learnt how to fit in by copying the speech patterns and dress codes of others and by imitating her co-workers. So while she may not have great emotional intelligence she is a very perceptive person.

But despite Keiko being the top worker and being able to live her life *her* way not everyone is happy. Her family and friends have tried to ‘cure’ or ‘fix’ her over the years. They can’t understand why she stays in her dead end job, why she doesn’t have a man in her life so she can get married and have children . Why can’t she conform to the perceived norms of society?

Now enter Shiraha, a new employee to the store. Shiraha is an obnoxious character, he’s lazy, self-centred, misogynistic and thinks everyone in the store is a stupid loser. He reveals to Keiko that he took the job so he could go on a ‘marriage hunt’. When he is caught stalking a customer he is sacked and subsequently becomes homeless. One day Keiko encounters Shiraha and takes pity on him. She rescues him and allows him to stay in her apartment. They hatch a plan to pretend to be a couple so that society will leave them alone. This absurd and comical arrangement works for a while. Keiko treats Shiraha like a pet, she feeds him and keeps him while he remains obnoxious and continues to sponge

off her. Shiraha convinces Keiko to leave the store and to get a higher paid job as there are now two people depending on her salary. Keiko does leave the store but becomes totally disorientated and depressed without it's routine. She gets an interview for a new job but on the way she has time to spare so she goes into a convenience store. She immediately sees how badly it is being managed and starts to re-arrange the shelves, she says " I could'nt stop hearing the store telling me the way it wanted to be, what it needed..." She tells Shiraha that she can no longer be with him and says " I realise now that I'm a convenience store worker even if it means I'm abnormal", to which he replies " the village mentality of society will never permit such a creature to exist - it goes against the rules".

But this reader cheered on Keiko as she came full circle and accepted who she is in the world.

The author Sayaka Murata highlights the inequalities and hypocrisies in the modern world in this book and explores the themes of difference, social norms and what is perceived as valued work and success.

The book club readers enjoyed the book and the author's deadpan writing which was just right to describe how Keiko experienced the world.

Alison Claffey

New Worship Space

in Cork Unitarian Church

During Covid and its various lockdowns, church life was largely on hold, I often thought the church was like a plane circling high above an airport waiting to land. During this time I began to think about some of the challenges presented by our 300-year-old city centre church, namely, how best to maximise the limited space we have. My idea to be fair, was not original, it was one proposed many years ago by Rev. Bridget Spain when she was minister in charge of Cork, sadly, it was never taken up, until now!

When I mentioned it to the church committee, the response was immediately positive; my plan was to swap over each side of the building, getting rid of a large kitchen that we didn't need, replacing it with a custom-built chapel and moving a streamlined kitchen and ministers office across the building to the other side. Of course it was ambitious, and it was going to cost money, but I use a constant refrain; "God is good" and I wasn't to be disappointed. A fortuitous set of circumstances had seen some pre covid dealings with the owner of the building next to the church. Sean Keohane had already donated to us a state-of-the-art flat screen TV and a chance conversation with this most generous of men, saw him offering to undertake and pay for the heavy work involved. Our debt of gratitude to him is beyond words and we have a notice in the new chapel to that effect.

The first job was to move what was the kitchen over to its new home, for those who know the building, the large room beside the bathroom. Half of this was to be the ministers office, so a dividing wall needed to be put up. Then the kitchen sink had to be moved over and plumbed. The sink proved impossible to move due to old age and Sean kindly paid for a new one. With kitchen and office now done and painted, it was time to tackle the old kitchen and convert it into a worship space.

First the old sink had to be removed and the plumbing also taken out and sealed. Then due to age and damp, parts of the room had to be replastered, sections of the wood panelling needed repairing. Work began in February, carried out by the minister, church

chair Neal Dunnigan and secretary Pearse O'Donoghue, the work was slow and sometimes painful! Everything had to be cleaned and prepared for painting, at this point we must thank the staff at Pat McDonnell paints who were fantastic and started to refer to me as; "The painting priest!". Our next decision was a colour scheme, one that suited a place of worship and was in keeping with the dignity of our historic building. In the end we decided on a scheme suggested by our Treasurer, Colm Noonan.

Bit by bit, working all day, every day, things began to take shape but as is always the case with old buildings, nothing runs smoothly, and one job always led to two or three more repair jobs having to be done. Soon though, things began to take shape and the response to our various social media updates was a great encouragement. Every Sunday members of the congregation would peek inside, most of the time all they saw was a building site but again their encouragement was great. A raised dais was built and installed, (again with thanks to Sean Keohane) and wood panelling made a sanctuary area distinctive.

Our very distinctive circular windows sprang to life with some TLC and a coat or two of paint, the panes of glass were frosted. The final piece of the jigsaw was along with heating to create an atmosphere and warmth and as we now broadcast our services, to cut down on background noise for those watching. The decision was taken to lay down a carpet. Here we thank committee member Teresa Goggin who took care of this and our thanks to Carpet & Tiles Ballincollig for all their help.

So, after months of planning, challenging work and wondering how we were going to pay for it, a guardian angel had appeared and on Sunday 3rd April we held our first service in our new chapel.

During the pandemic while we were grateful for the space the church hall afforded us, going forward this was never going to suit as a permanent arrangement. Our previous worship space had the disadvantage of being next to the bathroom.

Now we have a beautifully decorated warm and permanent worship space. It frees up the hall to be used for that purpose and with a seating capacity of about 55, it now allows the church to have a life during the week with a Wednesday meditation lunchtime service starting on June 8th and later in June we plan a

short Friday evening service for those heading home from work. We are also planning various activities midweek including “movie nights” and talks to open up Unitarianism to a wider audience. All of this is now possible, we are not dependant on use of the church hall and can operate independently of it during the week.

Since the chapel opened, we have noticed a steady increase in people walking in off of the street to have a look at the building. Like all churches, Covid stopped us in our tracks, but we are dusting ourselves off and getting on with it. We are working on plans to conduct repair and decorative work on the vestibule and the hall itself, as well as a revamp of the church entrance and courtyard with plans for a wild bee friendly garden.

But the nicest thing for me as minister has been seeing member of the congregation attending church and taking off their coats, progress indeed! (see pictures front and back cover)

But then as I always say; “ God is good”.

Mike O’Sullivan

Minister Cork Unitarian Church

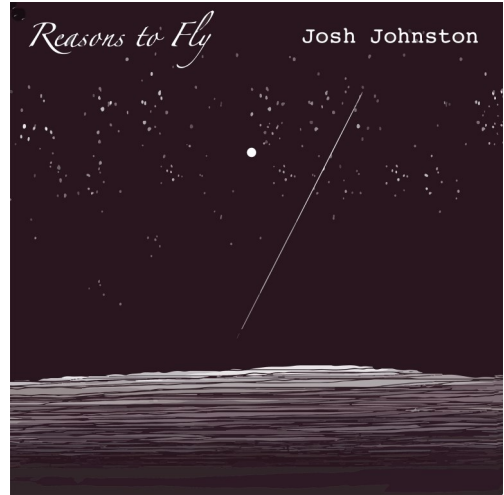
Reasons to Fly

A new album by Josh Johnston

This month, our organist and director of music Josh Johnston will release his sixth album as a singer-songwriter – his other life.

The album is made up of songs written with Doug Kinch, songs written at a songwriting retreat in Copenhagen in 2019, and two songs he didn't write at all. Loosely hung around a theme of movement – going places, stasis, the need to spread your wings and stay in one place, the music is performed by an ace session band featuring Dave Hingerty (The Frames, Kíla, Josh Ritter) and Jack Maher (Declan O'Rourke).

Josh will launch the album with a (almost) solo concert in Dublin Unitarian Church on St. Stephen's Green on Saturday 8th June. Tickets available and more info on this will be announced soon.



Congregation members lucky enough to be at the service on Sunday 22nd May got to hear Shari McDaid perform the Flute Sonata by German composer Paul Hindemith, composed in 1939. She was accompanied by Roland McDevitt at the piano. In April, Josh accompanied Carrie Harding ahead of her final year university performance recital. Both musical offerings were lovely and accomplished.

If you would like to play music during any service, please make contact with Josh. It's always lovely to hear different voices, musical styles and musicians during the service.