



ANVIL

Journal of Theology and Mission

CHURCH
MISSION
SOCIETY



Spiritual not religious

VOL 35, ISSUE 2



WELCOME TO THIS EDITION OF ANVIL

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Andrea Campanale

THE EDITORIAL

This edition of Anvil has come out of an event I organised at Church Mission Society (CMS) last July. It was my joy and privilege to give a platform to those I have worked with in mission to the spiritual but not religious (SNR) for many years so that they might share the learning they have gleaned from their practice with a wider audience. I hope that the articles some of them have subsequently gone on to write will take their insights yet further and help equip the church to see an interest in spirituality as an opportunity for dialogue that might enrich both parties' understanding of Christ's love and purpose in the world.

I have been seeking to build relationships with spiritual seekers in order to enable encounters with the divine for 14 years. I began in the healing field at Kingston Green Fair, worked and learned from Colin Brice, Simon Tierney and Katrina Moss at Eden People in Guildford and went on to create "Sacred Space Kingston". This began as an arts project to "imaginatively explore spirituality" and is now a fresh expression of Church. I found much in these articles that resonates with my experience of pioneering in mission and I was particularly struck with some common threads that run through most, if not all of them.

Pastor Phil Wyman from Salem, Massachusetts, highlights the tension that exists between the old sensibilities and new ways of thinking and being. This is familiar territory for all pioneers, but he goes on to highlight the desire that is particularly evident at festivals for ecstatic experience and personal transformation. However,

a search for transcendence that might bring greater wholeness is no fringe activity. I was intrigued that in a recent documentary focused on Alastair Campbell's personal exploration of depression on the BBC, hallucinogenic drugs were being trialled by Imperial College London as a possible medical treatment for anxiety and depression. In his article, Ian Mobsby also highlights the importance of the experiential for the SNR, which he roots in Trinitarian and Incarnational theology that reconciles us to relationship with God and the other in community. One of the ways in which this is being initiated is by making space for open-ended missional conversations through a network of spirituality dialogue groups called "SearchingSoul".

Diana Greenfield is the ordained pioneer minister in Glastonbury, and I was fascinated by the recollections of a couple of her friends who would describe themselves as SNR yet wanted to grow in "Christ-consciousness". This would certainly echo my experience having a stand at the Mind Body Spirit Festival in Olympia for the last 12 years. People embrace Jesus, but like Emma Moreton's reflection in her article, they have been hurt, rejected and judged by the church. Paul Cudby is also reframing Christian community with The Arden Forest Church to both model a new style of leadership and recognise people's spiritual connection to nature, using a creative and flexible liturgy based upon the changing seasons. I like that as a parish priest, he bridges the gap between being faithful to his responsibility for an inherited

model of church while reaching out to spiritual seekers.

I found Matt Arnold's article really helpful in bringing together the need for imagination and myth in apologetics and at the same time grounding this in the reality of Christ's birth and death in human history. He draws on the wonderful examples of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, as well as Jesus and St Paul. I think it has profound implications for mission in postmodernity that is captivated by story. The Space to Breathe case study outlines how the SNR can be engaged through art in a workplace context in order to encourage greater team collaboration and improve mental and physical health.

In summary, what I find so encouraging and challenging about this edition of Anvil is that all these wonderfully committed and innovative pioneers are drawing upon a rich heritage of Christian theology and practice. However, I would like to suggest that it looks for inspiration to a Celtic Christianity that has more in common with the Desert Fathers and Mothers. I wonder if the church got a bit stuck in a contextualisation that was appropriate for the more rationalistic post-Enlightenment world of modernity, which no longer feels so relevant to the fast-paced, media-saturated and radically consumerist society that we now inhabit. Today people in the western world are searching for a spiritual encounter they don't have to totally comprehend. They want mysticism and contemplation, a spirituality that protects and sees the imprint of the Creator in all living things. But this is not

passive, as Extinction Rebellion has demonstrated. They can live with ambiguity, yet see through any attempt at control or inauthenticity. The feminine is to be celebrated and integrated along with masculinity as patriarchy is no longer tolerable. Stories are valid bearers of identity, meaning and eternal wisdom. Inclusivity and participation are essential. Spirituality needs to encompass our bodies and emotions, not just our minds. Like these missionaries to the SNR, I think we are being stirred to figuratively and literally unblock the indigenous spiritual wells that exist in these sacred isles – to rediscover the God-infused signs and appetites that are all around once the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and sparks our imagination. These are exciting times to be alive. In the way of St Brendan as he set sail from the west coast of Ireland in just a coracle to cross the Atlantic, get ready to embark on a wild ride!

Andrea Campanale has been working with spiritual seekers for 15 years, having started doing outreach at Kingston Green Fair and then creating Sacred Space Kingston, a missional project and community “imaginatively exploring spirituality”. More recently, Andrea has led the Dekhomai team at the Mind, Body, Spirit Festival in Olympia and regularly trains people around the country on using Ruach cards. She has worked with the Faith Advisor at Kingston University and was on the chaplaincy team at the YMCA London South West. In addition, Andrea runs the Pioneer Ministry Certificate for Cliff College and is employed by CMS to teach, support and network pioneers through an expanding number of hubs and the Starfish Network.





TRAPPED BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND THE RELIGIOUS

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Phil Wyman

TRAPPED BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND THE RELIGIOUS LESSONS FROM TWENTIETH CENTURY PENTECOSTALISM

New England is a strange place. It's a land trapped between new values and old habits. I've been living just north of Boston for the last 20 years. In many ways, this strange world in the nation of my origin is further from my birthplace in southern California than it is from the land of my heart, which can be found in the wild mountains and coastline of Wales. There is a peculiar tension between formality and progressive politics, which is nearly impossible for a California boy like myself to understand, and I think offers a snapshot of the paradox that is found in the modern western struggle to connect to the sacred.

"What should I call you?"

Ellen is Jewish, and was the community event organiser for the city of Salem, Massachusetts. The church I had recently started was quickly becoming involved with the month-long Halloween events. Being Jewish, Ellen is an ethnic and religious minority among New England Catholics, Salem neopagans, mainline Protestants and the ever-growing category of those with no religious affiliation.

"You can call me Phil." Ellen's face scrunched up with a combination of confusion and frustration.

"No. I mean... should I call you Father, or Reverend... or," she clumsily rifled through titles, "... minister? What should I call you?"

Looking back, I wish I had chosen a cooler title, because what I said here was going to stick. I could have chosen Friar and sounded like a rowdy monk from medieval tales, or I could have said "Archimandrite", which I know nothing about, except that it is a particularly cool sounding title. Instead, I chose the least assuming, most gentle, friendly but most common title among American Evangelicals.

"You can call me Pastor, and please call me Pastor Phil. Using my last name is too formal sounding."

From that day forward, Jewish people, Catholics, lapsed Catholics, Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, pagans,

agnostics, atheists and the ever-growing category of "nones" (the religiously non-affiliated) would call me Pastor Phil.

Dan, who was my room-mate for a couple years, is a gentle agnostic soul. Yet even his New England sensibilities required that he call me by my title and my name. Ellen and Dan are just two among the majority of the people in Salem who fall into the impossible space between new values and old habits. Many of them have no formal connection to Christianity, and some, like a rising percentage of the population, never have. Yet, something deep inside drives them to respect the titles of my Christian faith. They simply cannot call me by my first name alone.

I am a Californian, and my informal, surfer-dude, egalitarian ways strain against that formality. Where I come from we are only reminded of these traditional ways when we watch *Game of Thrones*. Everything about such titles reeks of violence and the abuse of power.

Little did I know, many of the people on the growing list of my friends in Wales and England would suffer this same distant echo of formal respect for the leaders of religion that I found in New England. They often need to address me with a title attached. I am trapped in older cultures that can't decide if they want the new ways or the old world. And here is the strangest paradox of this tension: the informal new world of California is home to megachurches, and the old world struggles to keep its small churches alive. In fact, the wild west of America is awash with churches the size of small towns. The old world carries echoes of the ancient religious ways in their respect for the formalities, but eschews church attendance as though it were a quaint leftover practice from superstitious days. Meanwhile, the new world mocks the formalities of religion, but those who attend church flock to their supermarkets of faith.

We are all living in the severe cognitive dissonance of our bumbling affiliation with the sacred. We are trapped between the "religious" and the "spiritual". Problematically, we don't even know what these words mean anymore, because the definition markers are moving all the time. Yet, perhaps, there is one thing we do know, or think we know: one of these things is less formal than the other.

These tensions between the place of my birth and the land of my heart are a perfect picture of the no man's land of our souls.

"Religion" has taken on an ominous meaning. Without the descriptive adjective, one automatically assumes "organised" religion, and that term has become anathema. We imagine "Ichabod" scrawled over the

pulpits of the “OC”.¹ It reeks of power and money. The gold of towering cathedrals and the passing plates of TV evangelists stand against the poverty of the masses. “Spiritual” has soft and gentle undertones of ocean waves, solitary meditation and feelings of oneness with the universe. We imagine ancient trees, and common folk gathering around the roaring bonfire with a horn of mead. One word carries the grip of compulsion, and the other a freedom from being defined by another’s expectations.

We are spiritual but not religious.

That’s what we tell ourselves, but we don’t really know what it means. And perhaps it doesn’t matter, as long as it isn’t the nun who rapped our knuckles, the priest who abused the children, the evangelical pastor who ran off with the offering and the secretary or the stodgy church leaders who refused to allow women to preach. Terrible things have happened right under the eyes of our religious leaders, and it appears that the word “religion” has taken more of the blame for these terrible things than the perpetrators of the acts themselves. Yet while our friends move away from religion, they have not necessarily thrown the baby Jesus out with the bathwater.

SURVEYS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE POND

The movement towards a post-Christian culture has been happening longer and more quickly in the UK than it has in the US. The percentage of people self-defining as “none” in the survey and census data about religion is significantly higher in Great Britain than it is in the United States. In Great Britain, the percentage of people who declare no religious affiliation has grown to nearly half the population.² Northern Ireland remains the outlier with only 17 per cent of the people identifying as “none”.³ In the United States things look significantly different. According to the newly released 2018 General Social Survey from the University of Chicago, those identifying as “no religion” now equals the percentages of Evangelicals and Catholics. It is essentially a statistical tie between Catholics, Evangelicals and those

declaring “no religion”, each hovering near 23 per cent of the population.⁴

With the US and Northern Ireland statistically lagging behind England, Scotland and Wales in what has been seen as the growing secularisation of culture, they have something to learn about this movement towards religious disaffiliation. It may be that where the UK and western Europe have already gone, they will be going soon enough. Yet statistical information and studies coming from the US may likewise give us a live read on how the UK got to where it is now, and how we might be able to adjust to the still-changing dynamics of a post-Christian culture. Lessons are to be had in both directions.

One of the more enlightening studies on this subject was recently released by Harvard and Indiana University Bloomington. The study highlighted what it called “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion”. Despite the fast growth in the number of people in the US who no longer identify with a religion, the research pinpointed more specifically than previous studies who these “nones” are. The percentage of the population identifying as strongly affiliated and devoted religious followers remained consistent from 1990 to 2015. Prayer, attendance and volunteering were measured. Those who showed the greatest devotion appear to be attending church as faithfully as always and their numbers have not changed. Unsurprisingly, the number of people who were less devoted in their spiritual practices, and yet still attended church on occasion, was dropping in equal proportion to the rise of the religiously unaffiliated.⁵

What we learn from this study is the same thing we already have come to expect about the politics of our nations: the middle is disappearing. People and their opinions are being radicalised. Just as the rise of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump signal a dangerous polarisation of politics, the disappearing middle on opinions about religion signals an intensified polarisation of the secular versus religious debate and a rising distrust of churches and church leaders.

¹ “Organised Church” (OC) is a term used by the house church movement to describe denominations and non-denominational larger church groups.

² Harriet Sherwood, “Nearly 50% are of no religion – but has UK hit ‘peak secular’?” *The Guardian*, 14 May 2017, accessed 1 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/13/uk-losing-faith-religion-young-reject-parents-beliefs>.

³ “Revealed: New figures on religious breakdown in Northern Ireland - Working age Protestants drop by 14%” *Belfast Telegraph Digital*, 31 January 2019, accessed 1 May 2019, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-new-figures-on-religious-breakdown-in-northern-ireland-working-age-protestants-drop-by-14-37769786.html>.

⁴ Neil Monahan and Saeed Ahmed, “There are now as many Americans who claim no religion as there are evangelicals and Catholics, a survey finds,” *CNN*, 26 April 2019, accessed 1 May 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/13/us/no-religion-largest-group-first-time-usa-trnd/index.html>. Statistical information on Evangelicalism is lower than the actual percentages, because black Pentecostals are grouped in the Black Protestant category rather than the Evangelical category.

⁵ Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research,” *Sociological Science* 4 (Nov 2017), 686–700, accessed 6 May 2019, https://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/vol-4/november/SocSci_v4_686to700.pdf.

WHO THEN IS GROWING, OR AT LEAST NOT DECLINING?

With the diminishing population of people identifying with Christian churches across the western world, the one group that appears immune to this drop in attendance is the Pentecostal movement. Wherever they are, they are growing. In developing countries this growth is often phenomenal, but even in the US and UK they are still growing incrementally while other Christian churches are losing members.⁶

Interestingly, Evangelicals and Pentecostals (who should be considered a subcategory of Evangelicalism) were way ahead of the game in their disaffiliation with “religion”. They appeared to reject “religion” in a group movement decades ago. Pentecostals were already rejected by the traditional churches in their initial appearance at the turn of the twentieth century. The Jesus People Movement (the late 1960s and 1970s charismatic hippie Christian revival) emphasised that they were not interested in religion, but a relationship with Jesus. This was a counterculture anti-establishment movement that ran hand in hand with the trends of the times. They supposedly found Christian spirituality without religion. Their emphasis on relational and often ecstatic experience was an insightful and timely prophetic act tracking with the rise of neopaganism and New Age spiritualities, which similarly began their wild revival in the late 1960s. The hippies did not do this because they were astute students of the cultural distortions of the time. Rather, it was a spontaneous activity of passion for divine experience. Now, over decades these hippies have melted into Evangelical churches.

If Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, and the late Boston University sociologist of religion Peter Berger are correct, it is not religion but secularisation that is on its last gasp of life in our world. Both men were early adopters of the secularisation theory of religion, but later turned away from this position as they watched the world become more religious. As Berger saw it, only western academia and western Europe moved against this trend. Peter Berger begins his landmark book, *The Desecularization of the World*, with a critique of a massive tome that was part of the Fundamentalism Project funded by the MacArthur Foundation:

The concern that must have led to this Project was based on an upside-down perception of the world,

according to which “fundamentalism” (which, when all is said and done, usually refers to any sort of passionate religious movement) is a rare, hard-to-explain thing. But a look either at history or at the contemporary world reveals that what is rare is not the phenomenon itself but knowledge of it. The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but American university professors—it might be worth a multi-million-dollar project to try to explain that!

My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled “secularization theory” is essentially mistaken.⁷

Berger and Cox have highlighted the rise of Pentecostalism as evidence that it is not only Islam, but Christianity as well, that continues to grow across the world. Often, it is also Pentecostalism’s subversive little sister – the charismatic movement – that supplies the somewhat rare examples of growing churches in the shrinking mainline denominations.

In the UK, the British New Church Movement has experienced strong growth, and the Nigerian-based Redeemed Christian Church of God is reversing the traditional missionary pattern by planting new churches across the UK.⁸

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PENTECOSTALS?

These observations are not meant to be an apologetic for Pentecostal Christianity. Yes, I was a pastor in the world’s fourth largest Pentecostal denomination for 20 years, and I have seen wonderful things happening in the spirit-filled circles, but I have also seen the dark underbelly of religion in the halls of Pentecostal power. Each Christian tradition has its strengths and its weaknesses. Consequently, there are positive takeaways from the continued rise of Pentecostal Christianity. Yet there are also warnings, and we would do well to heed both. I can only highlight a few points below, but I believe these are applicable to the developing spirituality in much of our post-Christian culture.

⁶ *Atlas of Pentecostalism*, accessed 7 May 2019, <http://www.atlasofpentecostalism.net/cartography/item/0fd288150e92583bc9c1b4bd7ffeeaf9>.

⁷ Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008), Kindle edition, Kindle Locations 78–82.

⁸ Ruth Gledhill, “How reverse missionaries built the UK’s fastest-growing church,” *Christian Today*, 5 June 2014, accessed 5 May. 2019, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/how-reverse-missionaries-built-the-uks-fastest-growing-church/37894.htm>.

THE FIRST TAKEAWAY: PEOPLE DESIRE DIRECT PERSONAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

A number of years ago, I met the late NPR (US National Public Radio) correspondent and pagan leader Margot Adler. I am fairly well known in pagan circles for a Christian pastor, due to my location in Salem, Massachusetts, and my work among witches, Druids and assorted neopagans. She asked what kind of church I pastored, and when I said that I pastored a church in a Pentecostal denomination, she responded enthusiastically.

“Excellent! People need ecstasy.”

Access to ecstatic experience has been part of the rise of neopaganism. When I first began to study the small but fast-growing movement, I identified many of the participants as what I called “mystical agnostics”. They loved this descriptor, because they did not have a definition for deity, and often felt that defining the divine was impossible, but this lack of definition did not preclude ecstatic experiences with spiritual power. It is not only neopaganism that grasps for ecstatic spiritual experience; even the well-known, and aggressively anti-religious atheist Sam Harris has recently written a book that is a guide to atheist spirituality.⁹ Although he would deny it, he appears to be inching ever so slowly towards that even smaller category of pagans I met in my studies who were “mystical atheists”.

Burning Man, Electric Forest, Boom, Rainbow Serpent, and Sunrise Celebration in Herefordshire are just a few of the many festivals focused upon ecstatic experience and personal transformation. If this is a world giving up on religion, they are having a difficult time proving that they are uninterested in the ecstatic experience with the divine that has been the hallmark of religion since the dawn of humanity.

The churches and movements within Christianity that have emphasised personal experience with God have tended to be growing groups. They de-emphasised rules and formal liturgies and pursued ecstatic experience with Christ, and it appears the evidence is in – people are still finding God in those circles.

THE SECOND TAKEAWAY: PASSION IS CONTAGIOUS

Pentecostalism has revivalist and reconstructionist DNA. It seeks to reconstruct the activities and the patterns of the early church as found in the Book of Acts, and specifically emphasises the Baptism with

the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as described in the second chapter. It is revivalist in the sense that excitement and passion for God is perceived as necessary to the experience of God. The Pentecostal believer is regularly called back to their passion for God. Without this passion, Pentecostal church life would be considered dead, because God is found when people seek with their whole heart.

The weakness of this search for excitement is that it too easily falls into the trap of becoming an empty show of emotion, and yet one cannot deny the inherent power of being passionate for something. Passion is contagious.

The Pentecostal experience describes renewed passion as “revival”, which is seen as the highest goal of our spirituality. When revival occurs, people begin to pray with passion. They are renewed in their obedience to God. Churches grow, and salvation begins to spread among those who do not believe. This is how Pentecostals view the world. It is a simple view of church growth and evangelism, but if proof is truly in the pudding, then they have been eating from the deepest dish through the twentieth century. A movement that started on the stroke of midnight coming into the last century now makes up, along with its charismatic counterpart, one in four Christians worldwide.¹⁰

No matter how we feel about the movement, or whether we identify with the high-octane emotional experience of Pentecostalism, the facts speak for themselves – people around the world appear to want their religion to be experiential, passionate, and simultaneously practical. This has been the hallmark of Pentecostalism. Even in more intellectual environments, where Christianity is perceived as a dying irrelevant holdover from backwards days, the passionate primal cries of our ancient faith are still drawing people into the fold.

THE THIRD TAKEAWAY: BEING PROPHETIC DOES NOT MEAN EITHER SECULARISATION OR HYPER-SPIRITUALISATION

This point highlights one of the topics I struggle with most. There has been wild social distortion in our cultures over the last 60 years, and the response of the church to adapt appropriately has been clumsy at best. For this reason the topic of the prophetic demands both praise and correction.

Pentecostalism holds a robust view of the prophetic. It falls into both ecstatic and intellectual categories.

⁹ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

¹⁰ “Christian Movements and Denominations,” *Pew Research Center*, 19 December 2011, accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/>.

With the ecstatic, God predominantly speaks through individuals to individuals. This is similar to the words of knowledge given by Jesus to the woman at the well,¹¹ or the descriptions of church gatherings in 1 Cor. 14. The leadership of the church similarly makes prophetic annunciations concerning the life and state of the church – sometimes concerning the nation and the world. Traditionally the words directed to regional settings have been related to topics such as promises of revival among the nations. From time to time these parameters are exceeded, and the prophetic begins to resemble the dreams of Daniel.

In one focus of the prophetic, Pentecostal Christianity has tapped into the desires of the postmodern human. The personally prophetic element of speaking hope, love, life correction and reiterating the caring heart of God to seeking individuals cannot be understated for its power. In my work in festival settings across the US and UK, it is often the Pentecostal/charismatic Christian who seems to fit so well into the weirdest places. Burners, pagans, hippies, Dirty Kids, travellers and all sorts of people from all sorts of subculture groups, young and old, fall in love with these crazy charismatic ministers.

Of course, I cannot neglect the warning of falling into a cold reading-based,¹² platitude-filled gospel. Our airwaves have been drowned by the pretentious manipulation of TV evangelists. But with non-professional spirit-filled people simply wanting to serve God outside the church walls, I have seen crowds in the US and the UK fall in love with them. The cynics are surprisingly few, which gives anecdotal evidence for the fact that people are indeed remaining interested in spiritual things even as they throw off what they define as “religion”.

So, although the ecstatic approach to hearing God for other people carries the potential pitfall of looking like mediumship fakery, caring enough to seek God on behalf of other people represents the place of the priest or the shaman that people are looking for today. The amazing beauty of non-professional spirit-filled Christians serving in the festivals is that they encourage people to seek God for themselves, and thereby bring Luther’s call for a priesthood of all believers to fruition. Average Christians are being priests and prophets for seekers in the festival world, and they are passing that forward by calling others into a life of ministry.

Although personal prophecy carries elements of danger, the greater problem I see with the prophetic is

occurring in response to politics and social change in our world. The US takes the lead for speaking about the political world and cultural movements while falling into hypocrisy when doing so. This hypocrisy is most evident on the right, but we would be remiss not see it on the left as well.

By the time we begin to speak to the social movements of our time, and believe that we are “speaking truth to power”, we are typically only joining or responding critically to already popular movements in secular culture. These are the moments when Christianity critiques itself for being out of touch with the changing social norms. Problematically, the critique often does not recognise the power inversion occurring in the cultural shift. Thus we become supporters of one group of people to the exclusion of another. One Christian supports progressive social movement to the exclusion of old-fashioned conservatives, and another supports conservatives to the exclusion of progressive or liberal thought. In a movement that should be a family for all nations, the fact that we create categories of exclusion and consider it prophetic annunciation is a discouraging development. Instead of turning “the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents”,¹³ we are using the prophetic to divide houses. Perhaps Jesus would rebuke us as he did his disciples by saying, “You know not what manner of spirit you are of.”¹⁴ In a season of polarisation, we have entered into the politics of separation rather than the ministry of reconciliation. This trend between secularising and conservative Christianity looks strangely familiar to the space between the religious and the spiritual.

The prophetic demands that we identify with the struggles of the broken, and yet are willing to critique the uses of selfish power, small and large, on both sides of every argument. This is the place Foucault’s observation on the uses of power challenges us to think beyond left and right to discover right and wrong on both sides of the polarising issues of our time.

Conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have demonised the left and progressive churches have demonised the right, and there is no place in the middle. American churches show this divided tension with our presidential choices and UK church members are as divided over Brexit as the rest of the nation.¹⁵ We are divided on issues of climate change, sexuality and gender, immigration, national identity,

¹¹ John 4:4–42.

¹² “Cold reading”, *Wikipedia*, last modified 30 April 2019, accessed 14 May 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_reading.

¹³ Mal. 4:6.

¹⁴ Luke 9:55 (KJV).

¹⁵ Erasmus, “British Christians are as divided by Brexit as everybody else,” *The Economist*, 9 April 2019, accessed 5 May 2019, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2019/04/09/british-christians-are-as-divided-by-brexit-as-everybody-else>.

education, social programs for the poor and almost any topic that might require a vote. We have somehow lost the capability of merging the prophetic with the reconciling power of the gospel.

MINISTERING WITH THE EYES OF AN EXILE

I was not raised in a Christian church tradition. The culture of American Christianity was unfamiliar to me. I was isolated by the world of competitive swimming that consumed many of the hours I didn't spend in school. Purity culture, the revivalism of Pentecostal Christianity, the rise of the religious right and the tension of hippies coming to Jesus were all foreign to me.

I stepped into Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity in 1980 at the age of 21, and I entered it without the cultural trappings of someone raised with expectations of how one ought to behave in church. God was new and wild to me, and I suppose that meant I was new and wild to the church. I saw the culture of American Christianity through the eyes of an outsider, and somehow never lost those eyes.

Today I look back at 32 years of pastoring with the same outsider's eyes, and I bring new eyes as well. Having spent almost 25 of those years as a friend to witches and assorted neopagans, I can see the church through their eyes. Having been kicked out of a denomination for befriending witches,¹⁶ I also see the religious world through the eyes of an exile.

The eyes of exile may be the most important eyes any of us can bring to the prophetic table. We serve an exiled messiah from an exiled nation that rejected him. Christianity thrives in the cracks of exile. When it seeks to compliment and sustain the halls of power it soon falls into the trap of polarisation and hypocrisy. That is when it takes sides in our broken world and makes enemies out of the very mission field we are called to serve. But the position of the exile is able to look back at former dwelling places with the balanced combination of yearning and critique. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said thought of exile as something that provided someone with the eyes of a new perspective:

[W]hat is it that exile affords you...?... the essential privilege of exile is to have, not just one set of eyes, but half a dozen, each of them corresponding to the places you have been.¹⁷

THE DESERT FATHERS AND DESERT MOTHERS HERMENEUTIC

Along with my informal California insensibilities, I picked up a radical approach to Christianity that borders on the insane. I identify with the Desert Fathers and Mothers much more than I do with my adopted American Pentecostalism. I have found the ultimate exiled expression in their ancient expression of the faith.

My approach to morality is old-fashioned, but I want my approach to the other to come without judgement or expectation. If you are not a Christian, I do not expect you to live by the rules of the book I follow. And here's the tension of living in this space of the Desert Father hermeneutics: much of the prophetic today tends to focus upon polarising identificational politics and expects me to pick a side. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, and even Jesus himself, did not identify with party politics. They appear to have been equal opportunity critics – praising and correcting all sides with equal fervency. Jesus shows his equal opportunity critical approach with his simultaneous condemnation of Herod, the Sanhedrin Jewish leaders with their liberal theology and a stranglehold on Temple life, and the Pharisees with their strict theology and the stifling of the common Jew's spirituality.

Strangely, Jesus' most severe critique appears to have been pointed towards those who were closest to his theological position. His regular mention of the Pharisees comes across as an insider's house cleaning job. The Pharisees would later go on to save Judaism from complete eradication. It was these devoted men who kept the synagogue system alive in their centuries of exile. Jesus' severe critique of those whose doctrine most closely aligned with his views is a model for church leadership and defines the political side of the prophetic ministry of the church. It should be self-correcting, and simultaneously reconciling towards disagreeing parties outside the faith in as much as it is possible.

Even though the growth of Pentecostal faith groups has been a model for all the church through the twentieth century, the trend is slowing and may be coming to an end in western countries. I would contend that this is due to the fact that they have moved away from their own strengths. The passion for God and the apolitical prophetic annunciations of love, healing and acceptance have given way to patronising the powers that be. Perhaps we have all come to the place for which the Apostle John reprimanded the Ephesian church in

¹⁶ Suzanne Sataline, "Befriending Witches Is Still a Problem In Salem, Mass.," *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 October 2016, accessed 17 May 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116225928137808417>.

¹⁷ Phil Wyman, *Burning Religion: navigating the impossible space between religion and secular society* (Createspace, 2015), Kindle edition, Kindle Locations 3896–3898.

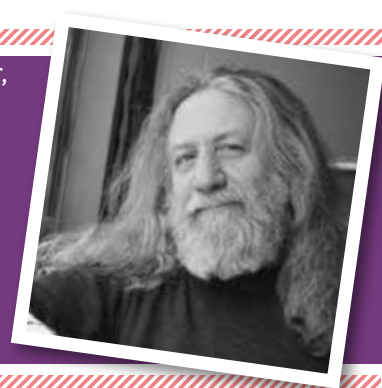
the Book of Revelation. Could it be that we have left our “first love”?¹⁸

This is the struggle for Christian religious experience in every generation. Every generation must experience God for itself. Every generation must cultivate its own passion for God, and every generation must find the balance between holding firmly to the ancient truths of the faith and adapting to the cultural movements of the times in which they live.

Christians living today have an added battle to wage in seeking to rediscover growth for the church: the struggle for defining “religious” and “spiritual” is a semantic battle that appears to have been lost. And now, even for Evangelicals and Pentecostals who were early adopters of this trend against “religion”, there is a growing sense among all Christians that the battle lines have been redrawn against us. People see us agreeing with them that “religion” is a bad thing. This draws them into the dialogue and elicits embryonic tremors of trust. Then we try to invite them to church. The contradiction is not lost on them. I believe that we must slowly regain a positive definition for “religion”. Until we do so, to say that we are “spiritual but not religious” while we invite people to our religious institutions will be an increasingly difficult tightrope to walk in the winds of powerful cultural change. No matter how hard we try to appear to be non-religious, we are still Christians, and followers of the messiah. People know this, and they will accept us for who we are, or they will live in the intellectually violent polarisation of our times. We may have shot ourselves in the foot decades back by adopting the anti-religious terminology for our faith. Fortunately there are people like William Cavanaugh and Karen Armstrong doing some of the hard semantic work for us.^{19, 20}

The fact that the word “religion” continues to be viewed in a negative light creates a problem, but it also creates an opportunity for us. The opportunity is that it allows us to chase after the relational, passionate and prophetic elements of our faith without the historic trappings many people have rejected. But, along the way, we may well be in need of slogging through the trenches of the semantic battle for our “religion”.

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¹⁸ Rev. 2:4 (KJV).

¹⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).



ENGAGING IN MISSION WITH THE “SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS”, DRAWING ON A TRINITARIAN DIALOGICAL APPROACH

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Ian Mobsby

ENGAGING IN MISSION WITH THE “SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS”, DRAWING ON A TRINITARIAN DIALOGICAL APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

The “spiritual not religious” (SNR) has become one of the largest social groupings regarding spirituality and religion in the UK, with around one fifth of the population fitting into this category, according to a BBC article.¹ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that it is growing in significance throughout the post-industrial western world.² From other research, exploring the “spiritual milieu” in Kendal, it was clear that many who call themselves SNR are doing so because they are seeking well-being.³ The BBC article also indicated that there was a high correlation between those who saw themselves as “spiritual” and those who struggled with anxiety and depression. Whatever else it denotes, SNR shows that the religious landscape of western, largely European, countries has significantly changed as we have shifted from a culture in late modernity through postmodernity to now what I and others would like to argue is a culture defined by post-secularism and the effects of the unrestrained market society.⁴ Such a cultural form holds onto the radical subjectivity and experiential insights of postmodernism, but reframes every person into an individual consumer, and, in this case, an individual consumer of forms of spirituality.

Often in the church we are unaware of the effects of the commodification of church and the Christian faith as a consequence of such a market society, which adversely affects the effectiveness of what we the church seek to do concerning mission and evangelism with those who call themselves SNR. What is clear is that many SNR

people consider the church and religion as having very little to resource them regarding their existential and religious questions of life. People are not searching for “truth” in my experience; they are seeking for some kind of transformation, or deep experience, or “what works for them”.

One fundamental mistake that many make is to assume that the starting place for engagement concerns what someone believes or does not believe. This assumes a conceptual or more rationalist approach to mission and evangelism. However, with the SNR, this context is very different. Rather than starting with the question “What should I believe?” many are asking a profoundly different and, dare I say, deeper question – “How shall I live?” – in the growing insecurity of those living in a market society facing the threat of global warming and ecocide. Such a question then is not seeking conceptual reassurance, but rather an entire way of life that opens up a deep spirituality and sustainability. If this is true, and I believe it to be so, then SNR people are not going to attend any form of discipleship course, no matter how interactive you make it; they are not seeking facts.

It seems to me that many SNR are seeking for opportunities to explore what it means to be human in the broadest sense, through a more trans-rational mode of knowing. In some of my writing I have defined “trans-rational knowing” as an act of intellectual modesty that states that rational knowing can only take you so far. To go beyond the limit of rationalism we need other means of knowing, through art, wisdom, experience, intuition and spiritual encounter. Yes, there is still an important place for rationalism in religion and spirituality – knowing facts about God – but the foundation of faith, knowing God through the experience of God – trans-rationalis – needs to be at the heart of faith or the spiritual path. Knowing through personal experience is a vital form of trans-rationalism that we are now rediscovering.⁵

Whether we like it or not, many SNR are, I think, seeking for subjectively meaningful spiritual experience. This presents quite a challenge to the Christian church, which is still struggling to throw off the shackles of modernity and an overemphasis on words and rationalism. So how do we approach engagement with the SNR? What approach to missiology and mission practice do we take if we are to be authentic to the way of Christ? I hope in this article to explore

¹ Tom de Castella, “Spiritual, but not religious,” *BBC News Magazine*, 3 January 2013, accessed 25 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20888141>.

² Paul Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution of Northern Europe: Personal Beliefs”, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 19:1 (2007), 1–28.

³ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 91.

⁴ Ian Mobsby, *God Unknown: The Trinity in Contemporary Spirituality and Mission* (London: Canterbury Press, 2012).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. I have incorporated several ideas into this essay from my book *God Unknown*, and for the sake of the reader where there is a direct correlation I have included the page reference.

a more Trinitarian-informed approach to missiology and mission practice, and then share some of the great work that has been piloted in what was called “Serum discussion groups” which have become the “SearchingSoul” spiritual dialogue groups that we have been experimenting with in central and south London.

A TRINITARIAN APPROACH TO MISSION PRACTICE

I do not believe you can ever really understand the Trinity by learning facts alone; you ultimately need to experience God as Trinity to “know” that it is true. A distinctly Trinitarian interpretation of the nature of God talks of the three “persons” of the Trinity, which creates the sense that the “Father”, “Son” and “Spirit” who have functional roles in the nature of God are often defined metaphorically as “Creator”, “Redeemer” and “Sustainer”. Further in the Eastern Orthodox Church is the concept of “perichoresis”, which explores how God can be one yet of three persons. This concept underlines the reality that God is a dynamic interrelationship of the “three-in-one” God. God then becomes a dynamic happening where people can encounter God directly as an unexpected event. We see this in the experiences of those in the Hebrew Scriptures with a mysterious other (for example, Gen. 18:1–3, where Abraham encounters what he thought were three angels who mysteriously become God); in the New Testament in interactions that Jesus had with people who found him shocking (for example, Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and how Jesus is always something other); and, in the Gospels and the letters, the shocking experiences of encounter with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and in the early church (for example, Acts 9:1–9). So, in this way, God is something deeply spiritual to experience. The relationship with the divine is fluid and dynamic, a form of transcendent event, knowing God through experience rather than knowing God through propositional facts. This is a profound form of missionary encounter.⁶

We encounter this experiential missional God in the Bible in texts such as that of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), the ultimate being the experience of Paul to the reality of God – hence the words of Eph. 1:17–18:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the

eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.⁷

Mission and missional encounters then become the work of the Holy Spirit, whose ministry is to unsettle people to the reality of God. So God is not absent; there is no need for Christians to speak for an absent God, more that Christians in a missional situation need to ensure they get out of the way of God, or prayerfully discern what God is already doing. It is the role then of the Holy Spirit to enable people to enter and progress on their unique spiritual path to the experience and reality of God. Ultimately you cannot do this through words, logic or argument. People need to experience God to be true for themselves. The mission of God is God’s, not ours. Ultimately the purposes of God as we understand them through Scripture is to enable people to become Christian and, further, to become disciples of Jesus. This deep theology of a God who is restoring or reconciling all things into right relationship with God is core to 2 Cor. 5:18–6:2, which states:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!⁸

In some Christian understanding of the role of the persons of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is sometimes called the “Comforter” and “Companion”, but this is far from my experience and understanding. I take this understanding further with the idea of the Holy Spirit as the “Holy Unsettler”. We encounter the divine through the subjective experience of the presence of God in the ordinariness of our lives. I would argue that this yearning for transcendence is the continuing work of the Spirit of God.⁹

This then has an effect on what, in practice, mission is about. Too often mission and evangelism are about people using all sorts of manipulative power language or playing on emotions to make an impact on others,

⁶ Ian Mobsby, *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church* (London: Moot Community Publishing, 2007), 54.

⁷ NRSV.

⁸ NRSV.

⁹ Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 104.

as if God were absent, or that such an approach was akin to the very worst of a pioneer missionary as a form of second-hand car sales person. There is some evidence that such an approach just leads to increasing negative stereotypes of the “de- and-un-churched” towards Christianity. A more Trinitarian-inspired approach to mission, to the contrary, requires the missionary or evangelist to be deeply discerning of God, and to in effect get out of the way of God. The role here then, I believe, is to create opportunities for people to experience God for themselves in the context of their own lives. In that way the role is more like that of a curator at an arts event or art exhibition. Much has been written by Jonny Baker and Mark Pierson regarding curation and worship coming out of the alternative worship movement. I would like to extend this metaphor further to the idea of “mission event curation”. I find this approach really exciting because it then becomes more creative, more playful and less controlling. By this I am not saying that we need to go back to exposing SNR people to forms of charismatic or alternative worship as an act of mission. I am saying that the ability to curate, the need to let go of the need to engage with “facts” or construct some form of course, and the need for mission to be open-ended and allow for subjectivity are essential.

If mission then is about enabling people to encounter God for themselves on their own terms, then it is ultimately about direct experience of God in some form, not exclusively theological thinking that leads to conversion of people to the reality of God. This is a really important insight if we are sincere about our increasingly postmodern post-secular context of the trans-rational (experience) over the rational (logic and thinking).

This more spiritual way of knowing through encounter of God, of the experience of God, then opens up an approach that is often attributed to St Francis of Assisi: “experience leading to understanding”, where people can grow into an understanding of the nature of God through their experience of God. It is the direct experience of the unfathomable love of God that ultimately reveals the truth of God, that leads us to our conversion and a transformation of our knowing – mind, body and spirit. True knowledge therefore involves both the rational and the trans-rational, and to know the Christian faith fully requires engagement with a trans-rational experience of the triune God.¹⁰

A recovery of a “Trinitarian-centred” mission practice also I think reflects a renewed appreciation of the

ministry of the Holy Spirit in mission. Here the Holy Spirit is named as the person of the Godhead that unsettles people’s perspectives of God, and that the Holy Spirit operates in the space between people and God. This is why John Taylor, in his famous book,¹¹ called the Holy Spirit the “Go-Between God”, who invites us to reimagine and re-encounter God. Our imagination becomes the place for seeing new potential and new concepts, as well as the place where we meet and encounter God through the Holy Spirit.¹² So in my mission practice, I have often run activities such as the SearchingSoul groups used in the PhD research I am currently conducting. In these, the general approach is to expect God to be present in the details of the conversation, and that this does not need to be forced – but that the Holy Spirit will be unsettling people to explore the gap between themselves and God the Holy Trinity, and that the process of conversion is a road of various staging posts as people become aware of the presence and reality of God in their lives.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this process did not begin as a purely New Testament phenomenon but began in the Hebrew Scriptures, where people attempted to make sense of disorientating experiences of God in their lives:

Walter Brueggemann, in his exploration of the texts of the Hebrew scriptures, links language to the self-revelation of God: that is to say that the words and names used of God come directly from the revelatory experience of God.¹³

The mission of God, the *missio Dei*, then becomes an interrelated cascade to God as Trinity as the *missio Trinitatis*, and therefore the mission of the people of God, the church: the *missio ecclesiae*. We hear the connection between the mission of God and the Trinity in the Gospel where Jesus is “sending” the disciples out to go and make disciples of the nations:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.¹⁴

However, at the same time this approach is not solely redemptive, but again driven by God, and it cannot be controlled or decanted into a course or communicated through human words; ultimately Trinitarian mission is about people encountering God:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: Collins, 1972).

¹² Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 64.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 213, 215, 225, 229–30. In Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 12.

¹⁴ Matt. 28:19–20.

I am saying that God is mystically present to all things, and that we can have confidence that God is seeking to draw all things back into restored relationship with the Triune God, and that God will do what God will do. This transcendent and incarnational understanding of God's mission to the world requires us to take a more mystical and trusting approach. Mission and evangelism is not about us representing the absent God; it is much more about us trying to catch up with what God is already doing.¹⁵

If God is a relational God, and if God as Trinity is demonstrating God's unity in diversity, then the nature of God has something to say about "common unity" or community. It is not therefore, I think, a coincidence that there is a cascade from God as Trinity, through Jesus as the visible expression of the invisible God as the Christ, to then empower the church to again model mission as the heart of what church is supposed to be about. All expressions of the church should be a missional community – the visible expression of the invisible kingdom of God.

The *missio ecclesiae*, church – or rather, the ecclesial community – then reflects this deep dynamic of the Holy Trinity, where God seeks to actively draw people to the reality of God. God gathers a community of autonomous individuals that collectively become one, and thus participate in mystery, belonging and unending love. It shows us a God that is both absent and present, this-worldly yet other-worldly, a God that is immeasurable and uncontrollable yet knowable.¹⁶

There has been much criticism of the danger of social trinitarianism, of projecting the nature of God into the human context.¹⁷ But there has to be a connection between our understanding of God as Holy Trinity and the gathering of people as church. As God models the *missio Dei* as the primordial mission community, so the church is also called to model being a missional community. The Holy Trinity is beckoning the church to model a way of being a spiritual community that reflects the very nature of the Trinitarian Godhead. The Holy Spirit is drawing those seeking missional and contemporary expressions of church for our postmodern consumerist context, to experiment with forms of church drawing on a perichoretic model.¹⁸

If all this is true, then as Christians we are increasingly needed to get out of the way of God, to allow God to do

what God wants to do. For me this is a massive relief from the pressure of so many fact-based and propositional approaches to evangelism and mission that are in danger of mixing power manipulation and coercion with mission practice. I have always felt such practice does damage to the church as it assumes that God is somewhat absent and therefore that we need to fight for God. No, this more gentle and Trinitarian approach to mission for me is ironically more biblically based.

The concept of God's mission, not ours... should be no surprise to us... God is God and will move, by his Spirit, speaking to people, engineering encounters, listening to the cries and prayers of all sorts of odd outsiders in ways that God is completely at liberty to.¹⁹

This means then that God can self-disclose the divine presence in the ordinariness of the details of our lives, as a place of experiential encounter of God, to help people grow and develop in an "I-Thou" relationship. The postmodern turn has helped us to see that our very lives allow us to experience the Christian God as radically subjective. God's immanence is hyper-present, so that we can encounter the divine through the subjective experience of the presence of God in the ordinariness of our lives. This yearning for transcendence is the continuing work of the Sustainer and Perfecter, the Spirit of God. I would pose the question: might virtual reality conceivably provide for the possibility of an "I-Thou" encounter? Have the vehicles of information technology and consumption, imperfect and flawed pursuits of humanity though they are, become an opportunity for a transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit? I believe this to be the case.²⁰

Taking inspiration from Jesus, the incarnation of the Redeemer, the Messiah, who came to us in human form as the revealed expression of God, the mission of God is therefore incarnational. As God came and entered human culture as a human, so we are called to engage in contextual mission fully embracing culture and the truth that Christianity is revealed through the contextualisation of the gospel. In Incarnational theology we encounter Christ the servant, the lover of people, who cared for the poor, the children and the marginalised. We encounter the Christ who performed miracles so as to include those excluded from society; essentially, the Jesus that we encounter in the Gospel stories, who is physically present in the world. Incarnational theology has a high regard for human

¹⁵ Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ See William Hasker, "Objections to Social Trinitarianism," *Religious Studies* 46:4 (2010), 421–39.

¹⁸ Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 74–75.

¹⁹ Richard Sudworth, *Distinctly Welcoming: Christian Presence in a Multifaith Society* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2007), 29. In Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 119.

²⁰ Mobsby, *God Unknown*, 104.

culture, the need for social justice and the desire to see the kingdom of God realised in the here and now. It is strong on valuing our common humanity, on inclusivity and the practice of love.²¹

So as Jesus engaged with all sorts of people of different cultures, the Trinitarian God drives us to engage with people on their terms. This is also unique in that Jesus is the revealed image of God in the context of the Trinity, where Jesus as the image (icon) of the invisible God is self-revealed in all contexts and beckons all people towards the Trinitarian God. This is the focus of Col. 1:15–17:

The Son is the image [icon] of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Developing further the idea that mission is incarnational is the key truth that mission must be relational. My favourite New Testament text, 2 Cor. 5, emphasises the call that we are to appeal to people to be reconciled to God as we are called to be friends of God. It is into this mix that the vibrancy of the Trinity speaks to us, drawing us into intentional forms of relationship that change and challenge us to the core of our being. Who is it that we seek when we seek the Lord our God? How does this three-in-one God transform our way of life? How do we live in a strange land where we need to learn social skills, tolerance and love? What will inspire us to shift from being semi-skilled spiritual tourists to committed and passionate Christian pilgrims? It is my belief that God is seeking to draw us into deeper forms of spiritual community and relationship through God's own experientially revealed nature. The challenge to the church then is whether it is willing to listen to the still, small voice of the God who, like it or not, never stands still.²²

This then means that true contextual mission needs to be conducted with a commitment to authentic relationships between the pioneer and the individual or group with the aim of establishing a relationship between the individual or group and God. With the gap between where people are and where church is being so wide, this has required initiatives like fresh expressions in the Church of England, which has again emphasised the importance of mission being truly relational. This has led to forms of training for lay and ordained pioneers and missionaries to have the skills

to learn how to do such relational mission, and to be able to do that in various contexts where you may have nothing in common culturally or in terms of ethnicity. Building relationships of integrity then become key to the basis of such mission activity, which then opens up the heart of a truly Trinitarian missiology, where mission is about leading people into an authentic relationship to and with God; this is where God self-reveals the divine nature and opens up the truths of the Trinitarian God as something to be experienced. At the heart of the Trinitarian mystery is the fact that God, previously unknown, chose to actively engage with human beings, and thereby reveal something of the divine nature. As we will see later, it took some time for Christians to be able to articulate an understanding of God as three-in-one. It took the Early Church Mothers and Fathers around 500 years to gather together the many hints that pervade Scripture and articulate the doctrine of the Trinity.²³

EXPERIMENTS WITH SEARCHINGSOUL SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE GROUPS

As of spring 2019, we have now established four SearchingSoul spirituality discussion groups, which are gatherings of the SNR for facilitated dialogue in bars, pubs and eateries in central and south London, and there are plans for three further groups to begin in the summer. After some careful piloting, these groups are structured to discuss a theme with space for uninterrupted speaking and deep listening and then open discussion. They have been publicised through the “MeetUp” social media application and Facebook. Sessions begin with a quick introduction to the theme, followed by each individual speaking for up to five minutes uninterrupted, and people can ask clarification questions before entering into open respectful dialogue. These groups have been a wonderful experience for me personally as I have discerned God at work breaking down negative stereotypes, where people have come consistently believing that all expressions of Christianity were “fundamentalist” and are then shocked to discover that there is a contemplative spiritual tradition within Christianity. By not seeking to dominate conversation, by having a willingness to be open-ended, the interaction between Christians and the SNR has broken down misunderstandings, and in at least three situations participants have begun the process of becoming Christian, with four participants becoming members of various missional or fresh expressions of

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² *Ibid.*, Xiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

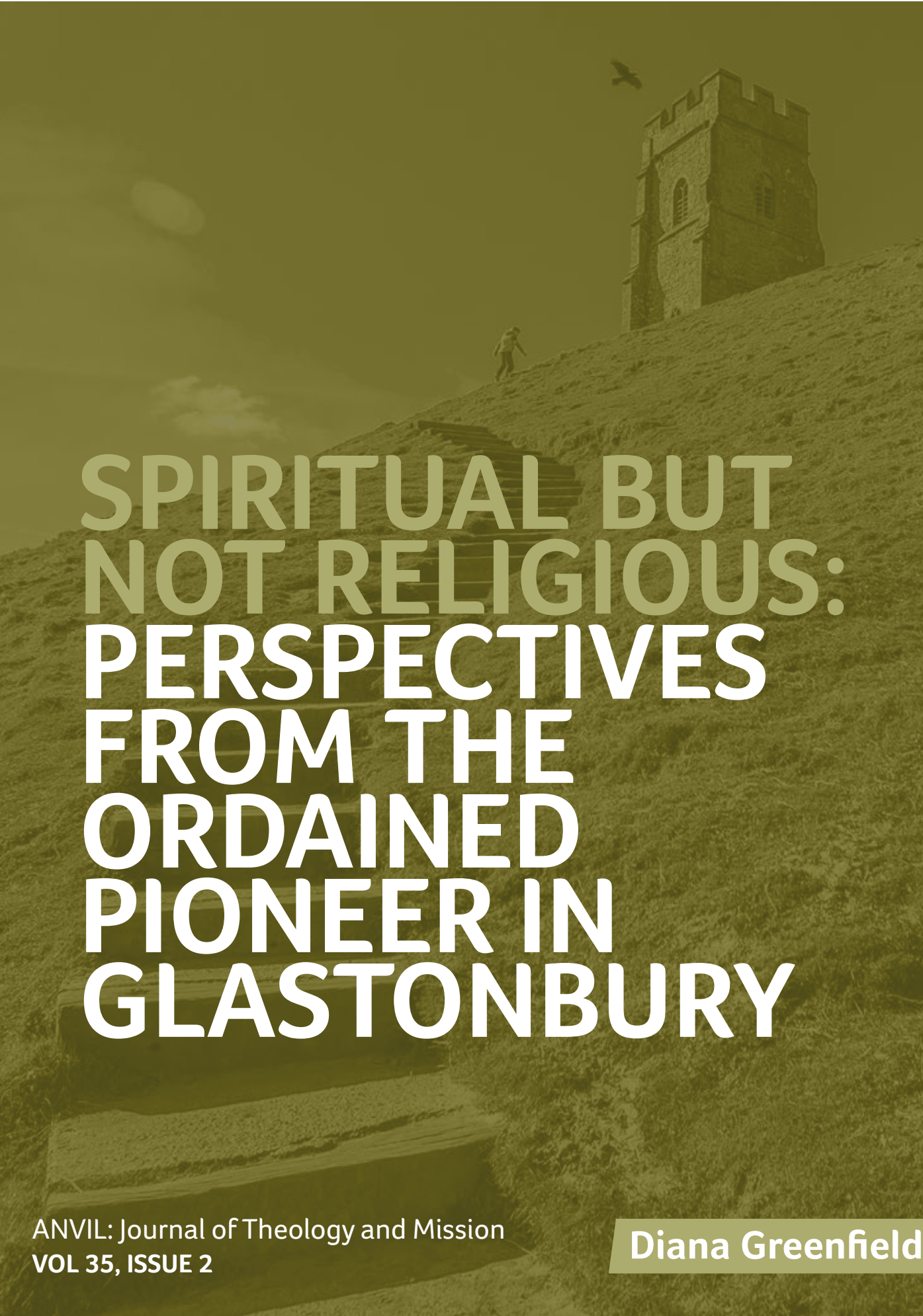
church. It's not always easy, as you never know if people are going to turn up, and it is often not easy curating the conversations of people you do not know, but early indications are that SearchingSoul" as an approach to mission with the SNR can be an effective approach to missional engagement. Once it is completed, I hope to share results and further reflections of the research PhD I am conducting regarding this study on the SNR. Anecdotal early evidence seems to suggest that the "SearchingSoul" dialogue groups are a significant approach to missional engagement with the SNR.

CONCLUSIONS

A Trinitarian-inspired approach to mission with the SNR is a particular open-ended way that assumes that God will make the divine persons of God present in the conversations and in the details of the lives of those who gather for spiritual exploration and dialogue. Trinitarian mission practice assumes that God is an event of grace, and that God the Holy Spirit functions as a Holy Unsettler to bridge the gap between where people are and God. Further, the role of the pioneer missionary as curator has been explored as a particular role and model to facilitate such an open-ended approach to mission practice. It is hoped that the SearchingSoul spiritual dialogue groups will help play their part in developing appropriate, contextually relevant and effective forms of missional engagement with the SNR. Further PhD research into this area continues, and the author will seek to share these results once completed.

Ian Mobsby is the Woolwich episcopal area mission enabler in the Diocese of Southwark, and the part-time priest-in-charge of the parish of St Luke's Church in North Peckham. He is currently completing a research PhD through the Archbishop's Examination in Theology in London that explores the spiritual views and missional needs of spiritual seekers through an ethnographic study. He has involvement in founding three missional fresh expressions of church, with a background in new monasticism. He is an associate of the fresh expressions movement, and has written a number of books on the areas of Trinitarian spirituality, mission and mission practice. He is the prior of the Wellspring Community Peckham, and the guardian of the new monastic society of the Holy Trinity, which seeks to support new monastic communities emerging in the UK and beyond. As a theological educator Ian is an associate lecturer of St Augustine's College of Theology in south London and a mission advisor to a number of Anglican/episcopal dioceses in the Anglican Communion.





SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ORDAINED PIONEER IN GLASTONBURY

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Diana Greenfield

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ORDAINED PIONEER IN GLASTONBURY

On May the fourth (Star Wars day) I set out to Galicia in Spain to walk the last 116 km of the Camino de Santiago, the Way of St James.

This pilgrimage has become so popular that over 250,000 people walked at least the last 100 km last year alone. The tradition of the pilgrimage is to reach Santiago de Compostela and visit the relics of St James, which are said to be laid to rest there. I had thought that on my journey there would be people who were walking the Camino for spiritual if not religious reasons, thus providing source material for this article. I was surprised to find this was not the case. The reasons people gave me were generally more prosaic: “Because I can”, “It was on my bucket list” and “I don’t know”. With some wanting the opportunity to “get away from it all” or “for a new challenge”, there were a significant number who wanted to “connect with nature”. What nobody really said was “This is spiritual pilgrimage for me”, although a couple were most definitely engaging with it as an opportunity to think about their own Christian faith. Research conducted by CaminoWays, the specialist company with whom I travelled, suggests that my observations are not unique; they suggest that a mere 28 per cent of those people asked walked for spiritual or religious reasons.¹ People are thus not particularly pilgrimaging to Santiago for spiritual reasons.

It struck me that I had gone from one place of pilgrimage to another, as much of the work I currently do is conducted in and around Glastonbury. People most definitely pilgrimage to Glastonbury for spiritual reasons, and seemingly more so than those who go on Camino to Santiago. Some years ago, a group of people in the town realised that there was no central place for information for the spiritual pilgrims, and the tourist information office wasn’t in a position to help. The Pilgrim Reception Centre was therefore created and is designed to help pilgrims, visitors and residents explore the diversity of faith represented in the town.

WORKING DEFINITIONS

While studying with Church Army in the late 1990s I developed my own working definition of spirituality. It is far from the only definition but has helped me frame an understanding of the concept when working with others.

“Spirituality is seeking and engaging with the extraordinary in our ordinary lives.” While this is by no means a deeply academically researched definition, it has stood me in good stead over the last few years while ministering in and around Glastonbury.

In seeking to define the word “religious”, I turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary*; the simple definition is: “Relating to or believing in a religion.”²

If the definitions of the two words are combined, my understanding of spiritual but not religious is “seeking to engage with the extraordinary in our ordinary lives but not relating to or believing in a religion”.

The Dalai Lama offers a slightly longer definition in his understanding and connection between the two terms:

I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, rituals, prayer and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of *nirvana* and salvation, are directly connected with religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities.³

The spiritual qualities listed by the Dalai Lama echo the fruit of the spirit as listed in Gal. 5:22–23: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”.⁴ A popular meme that can be found across the internet is “God wants spiritual fruits, not religious nuts”. Certainly, Jesus was not a fan of the

¹ Karl, “7 reasons why people walk the Camino de Santiago,” *CaminoWays.com*, 23 May 2017, <https://caminoways.com/7-reasons-why-people-walk-camino>.

² “Definition of religious in English,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed 15 May 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/religious>.

³ Dalai Lama, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium* (London: Abacus, 1999), 22–23.

⁴ NRSV.

overtly religious people of his time whom he described as hypocrites, greedy, self-indulgent, lawless and on one occasion a brood of vipers (Matt. 23).

A PROBLEM WITH LANGUAGE

I never have much liked being defined as “religious”. Even at school it was the disparaging term for those of us who attended Sunday school or the church youth group. It was discernible even then that those using the term intended it as an insult. As an evangelist (another contentious word for many) I regularly get people saying to me phrases such as “I don’t want to know about religion, religion causes wars”. However, even the famous atheist Richard Dawkins does not actually believe the simplicity of that statement: “My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal *label*, and the most dangerous one, by which a ‘they’ as opposed to a ‘we’ can be identified at all.”⁵ Even though he has a good point, the phrase is regularly used as justification by those not wanting to engage with all things religious. Consequently, they seek a different word to express their yearning for the extraordinary that they encounter in their lives.

The sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger seeks to understand the limits of the term “religious”:

The growth – observable everywhere in societies that are known as secularized – of invisible or diffuse religiosity dispensing with the mediation of specialized religious institutions constantly reopens the question of the limits of the term “religious”. But the issue regularly comes to naught in the conflict that cannot be resolved between those who choose to be all-inclusive and those who choose to concentrate their attention only on religions which are socially identified as such.⁶

She argues that pilgrims, who are on an individual path of self-discovery, and often with a do-it-yourself approach, can also be described as religious, thus broadening the definition of religious to those who would consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious.

In their exploration of the differences between religion and spirituality, Heelas and Woodhead acknowledge a cultural shift or a “massive subjective turn in modern culture”. They describe it as “a turn away from ‘life-as’ (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong

leader, self-made man etc.) to ‘subjective-life’ (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation).”⁷ They distinguish “life-as” as religion and “subjective-life” as spirituality. For Heelas and Woodhead, the subjective life “has to do with states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments – including moral sentiments like compassion”.⁸ They do acknowledge that, as with all working definitions, some confusion can occur but these definitions have given them scope to explore the subject.

A SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS CONVERSATION

Last summer, while working at a festival I came across a really interesting man called Nik Greenheart (formerly Nick Ellacott). I am quite used to people having a strong attitude towards the fact that I am a Church of England priest and represent an institution for which they have no time. In this instance I was subjected to a non-stop, 45-minute, passionate monologue about the negative things “the church” has done. The topics ranged from the canon of Scripture to the financial and institutional power and control of the church, with many other themes in between. It was pointless of me to try and respond so I just sat and listened. Then I began to get to know the man behind the opinion. At the age of 17 he was due to take his A levels and was likely to have got a place at Keble College, Oxford to read Theology, and most likely would have followed the path of becoming a priest. For some reason he suddenly realised the “Christian religion”, of which he had become a part, did not represent the teachings of Jesus whom he loves and respects. He dropped out of his A levels and set off travelling and seeking to become a healer “like Jesus”. His path has taken him to learn shiatsu, but he has developed a methodology all his own. In Glastonbury he is known as a very good healer; the language he uses depends who he treats – whether the energy for healing comes from “the source”, “chi” or “the Holy Spirit”.

What matters to him is that there is something spiritual in the healing he does. He spends time with people who follow a variety of different spiritual paths. He does not identify with any of them except perhaps the Green Man, who is an archetypal symbol and a historical idea that represents the eternally renewing energy and wisdom of nature – predominantly the male connection. To me Nik is a classic example of someone who is deeply

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Devil’s Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 158.

⁶ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

⁷ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

spiritual but vociferously not religious. When I meet him now, we get into deep conversations that range from C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien to foot-washing and servant hearts. One day he said, “You do realise, ‘Vicar’, whenever we meet we always end up discussing theology” – to which my response was, “You do realise, you are the one who starts the conversations.” He has no desire at all to revisit the path he left so suddenly at the age of 17 but still speaks with great affection for some of the clergy who influenced him in his teenage years, including the Revd Stephan Hopkinson, former counsellor and assistant chaplain of Winchester College, and the Rt Revd David Conner.

One of the biggest things that my continued encounters with Nik reminds me of is the anger and frustration there is towards the institutions of religion – and not least the church. It can be for any number of reasons but the result is that more and more people are turning from the church with the argument that they are not religious.

GLASTONBURY TOWN

The “new age” that grew out of the free festivals of the 1960s and 1970s, an eclectic mix of beliefs and practices focused around a desire for a holistic way of life, gave the freedom to explore spiritual practices from other traditions. The first ever Glastonbury Festival in 1970 was heavily influenced by these. It was known then as the Pilton Festival as it was, and to this day still is, hosted in a village seven miles outside the town of Glastonbury. At that time entry tickets cost £1 and included free milk from the farm. After that first festival it is said that a number of the “hippies” who had found themselves in the area never left. Inspired by the “spiritual” nature of the town, they stayed and made it their home. Since then Glastonbury town has developed into a “melting pot” for all things New Age and of an alternative spiritual nature. At the last formal count there were over 70 different spiritualities and religions represented in a town of approximately 10,000 residents. It is said that if you can’t find the religion you are looking for in Glastonbury, we can invent one for you – obviously if you have enough money.

There are other key influences in the town. While it is known for Glastonbury Abbey, which was the second largest abbey in the country prior to the Reformation, it is also thought to be the site of one of the earliest Christian churches in the UK. Alongside of all of this, “Glastonbury is thought to have been a site for pre-Christian worship, perhaps because of its location by the Tor, the highest of the hills surrounding Glastonbury

and a superb natural viewpoint... there is a form of terracing around the Tor which has been interpreted as a maze based on an ancient mystical pattern. If so, it would have been created four or five thousand years ago, around the same as time as Stonehenge.”⁹ There are individuals who seek to represent that pre-Christian faith through druidic practices, although the most honest among them will acknowledge that since there is no evidence of what happened in the past they are in fact neo-Druids, seeking to reinvent how the spirituality of the time might have been expressed. Alongside the neo-Druids is the renewed interest in “traditional” witchcraft; while this is in some ways similar to Wicca, those who seek to be “traditional” witches tend to be less ritual-orientated and seek to reclaim the word “witch” as meaning wise-woman or herbalist.

Another group who have a great influence on the spiritual landscape of Glastonbury are those who follow the Glastonbury Goddess. Kathy Jones has been the driving force behind this movement; I heard her give a talk where she explained that there was nothing written about following the Goddess so she invented one herself. However, her driving influence came from the radical feminist movement of the 1970s. For many who follow the Goddess, it is about a desire to redress a perceived imbalance of the patriarchy of the church.

When I first arrived in Glastonbury nine years ago, I heard someone describe this melee of people as “alternative”. My initial reaction was that it was a mistake to label them all together in such a way, until I learned that actually it is a title the “alternatives” have adopted for themselves. I found myself wondering, “Alternative to what?” My realisation is that they have chosen a lifestyle that is alternative to what is represented by mainstream cultures and a spiritual path that is alternative to the institutional religion of the state. It seems to me that many of the “alternatives” in Glastonbury can be categorised as spiritual but not religious, but out of sheer contrariness would probably decline to identify with the label.

FINDING CONNECTIONS

When I was licensed as the diocesan adviser for new religious movements and alternative spiritualities (catchy title), I chose as the reading Acts 17:16–32 – Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus. He represented his faith to the philosophers but he didn’t tell them they were wrong; he talked and debated and found a statue to the unknown god, one that he could identify with and one from which he could expand his teaching of the gospel. He moved his teaching from the temples to

⁹ Ben Johnson, “Glastonbury, Somerset,” *Historic UK*, accessed 16 May 2019, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Glastonbury/>.

the debating context of the day. He explained that the God he believed in created the heavens and earth and everything in them, therefore giving a context for his existence and a worldview for his faith. He explored the idea of searching for that God, and that we have been called to repent of human ignorance. While some of the philosophers dismissed Paul as a babler, some asked to hear more from him and some came to be believers.

In a town where the spiritual and philosophical diversity is so great, and in a culture where individuals can choose their own truth, it is important not to set oneself up as right and all others as wrong. This can be misconstrued as universalism, but for me (note the ownership of my truth) I have always believed that it is God's Spirit who brings people to faith. Like Paul or Apollos, all I am doing is planting and watering seeds; I am nothing because it is God who gives them growth (1 Cor. 3:6–7). It is about representing the faith of following Jesus in a gracious and respectful manner and ensuring that the gospel is heard in the marketplace of spiritualities on offer.

Morgana West from the Pilgrim Reception Centre recognises that while we are not going to all agree, we can still work together to build a united community. "Building bridges between diverse beliefs is essential if we want to live in a community that has great social cohesion. It doesn't have to mean we have to all become one homogenised blob of humanity, but it CAN mean that we respect each other, even if we don't agree. We can also take our acceptance one step further, by proactively encouraging and supporting people of good heart and intention on their own path through life. We know only too well that there is widespread agreement that bridge building can be successful in reducing prejudice and hostility between different groups and in helping people to live peacefully alongside each other."¹⁰

Fairly early in my time in Glastonbury I took part in the "Bardic Trials of Ynys Witrin" (thought to be the Celtic name of the Tor), a competition for storytellers, poets and songwriters rather akin to an eisteddfod. I found a way to weave part of my faith into the theme of the day, thus entering respectfully into the trials but holding true to my integrity as a follower of Jesus. It was interesting to note the struggle for some that since I was a representative of the church, I should not be there. This is not one of the rules, and as I understand it there was a degree of consternation from the judges about whether it was appropriate for a Church of England priest to win. I didn't win, and I didn't want to; I wanted to take part in a community activity that enabled me to engage culturally and credibly. The

following year I was welcomed as an honorary bard of the Ynys Witrin Gorsedd.

Over the subsequent years, many of these people have become my friends. I was chaplain for the first ever Druid mayor, who holds some interesting perspectives on the stories of Jesus. It has been my privilege to conduct some incredible funerals in the church that have represented the diversity of the spiritual community while still maintaining a Christocentric focus.

The other touchstone passage to which I turn is 1 Cor. 9:19–23. While I struggle with the language that Paul uses "to win people for Christ" (not a conversation for here), I very much identify with the idea that it is important to become like those around you in order to relate to them. To become as a "spiritual but not religious" person to the "spiritual but not religious" people around me has enabled me to understand why they think the way that they do, to help them navigate a path that is not averse to following Jesus but is often averse to the way Jesus is represented by the church. Back to Nik Greenheart when referring to the priests who inspired him: "I took their inspiration, their 'breath of god', to fast track my own, life pilgrimage. I don't mean to kick over tables, for love, but, sometimes, I find Jesus' example too hard to resist..."

One of the things I find, when talking to people who consider themselves as spiritual but not religious, is their need to tell me how they used to go to church, or they have been baptised into one tradition of Christianity or another. I wonder whether the need to tell me this is out of some kind of misplaced guilt or the thought that I might judge them for the choices they have made. In his book *How to Be an Agnostic*, Mark Vernon suggests that this is because the church can represent a parental role towards an individual in a similar way to a parent–child relationship. He suggests that the process a child goes through in seeking to move to an independent relationship from their parent, when that relationship is toxic, can be similar to that which an individual might experience when he or she attempts to question the faith of the religious institution where they have belonged. What this means is if, for example, the parent withdraws love from the child in order to control their perceived wayward behaviour, the child will react with frustration and anger towards the parent. "What this also means is that it is the person who has turned their back on the church who is most likely to become the most vociferous campaigner against the church: it is as if they want to destroy the parent that has rejected them, a rage that is consciously expressed as disgust at Christian values."¹¹



¹⁰ "Pilgrim Reception in Glastonbury," accessed 16 May 2019, <https://www.unitythroughdiversity.org/>.

¹¹ Mark Vernon, *How to Be an Agnostic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 109.

The teachings of Jesus are popular with many people who are spiritual but not religious, but they will put them alongside other teachings such those of as Gandhi or Kahlil Gibran (best known for his inspirational work *The Prophet*). It would seem that being spiritual but not religious is no longer constrained by the perceived limitations of belonging to an organised religion. This does mean, however, that the joy that can be discovered by delving deeply into the traditions of the church is lost. I am known for oft quoting G. K. Chesterton: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”¹² Throughout my many conversations, a theme that crops up regularly is a desire to connect with the “Christ Consciousness”. This idea, for the spiritual but not religious, has been separated from Christianity and has become an experiential goal in spiritual connectedness. A while back a friend posted on social media the question “Who has the best connection with Christ Consciousness?” I answered that surely Christians do, and was laughed at. When I relayed this question to another friend, who runs a festival speaking venue, he said that the church had no mysticism, so how could they connect with the Christ Consciousness? My response was initially sadness but I then found myself explaining about the rich heritage of mysticism from the Desert Fathers and Mothers and on through many saints all the way up to contemporary people who have influenced me, such as Richard Foster. The result of that conversation was that I spoke in his venue on the subject of “Encountering Christ through the Mystics”, which began as a journey of explanation and concluded with an Ignatian-style meditation of the Transfiguration, thus enabling those present to encounter Christ. It was a great privilege to journey with people who had no real understanding of the rich heritage of the church and enable them to encounter Christ the way followers of Christ have done so for centuries.

RESONANCE

The most relevant conversation I had while walking the Camino was with Miranda Bromley. She specialises in coaching and spoke of a “resonance” or an “in communion with” the people she coaches. That “resonance” is characterised by what she describes as a deep listening or hearkening that can be found more in silence and space than in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In her MA thesis she describes the feeling that she suspects others crave. “The plethora of activities and experiments on the smorgasbord whilst, in themselves, have been reflective, have made it a busy, crowded place; a complicated place. As I surface from it I find myself yearning to be in – the silence that lies the other side of the roar.”¹³ She suggested that this idea could explain why so many people were walking a pilgrimage but without necessarily recognising it as a “spiritual” activity; they crave a resonance that they cannot explain. In the same way, I observe how so many people are drawn to the peace and liminal space that is St Margaret’s chapel and almshouses in Glastonbury, often inexplicitly to the idea of having silence and space.

One of the things that I have found as I have worked more and more with people who are spiritual but not religious is that I too have sought more silence and space. I find myself craving silence amid the liturgy of a church service; I no longer want the noise of the radio to block out the quiet when at home and I find myself drawn to liminal spaces. For me those are the thin places where heaven and earth are closer together. As I seek to be in those places I start to discover “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).¹⁴ It is in a yearning to be “in communion with” the divine where I resonate most with the people around me, and I suspect it is what drives the spiritual but not religious on their quest to seek and engage with the extraordinary in their ordinary lives.

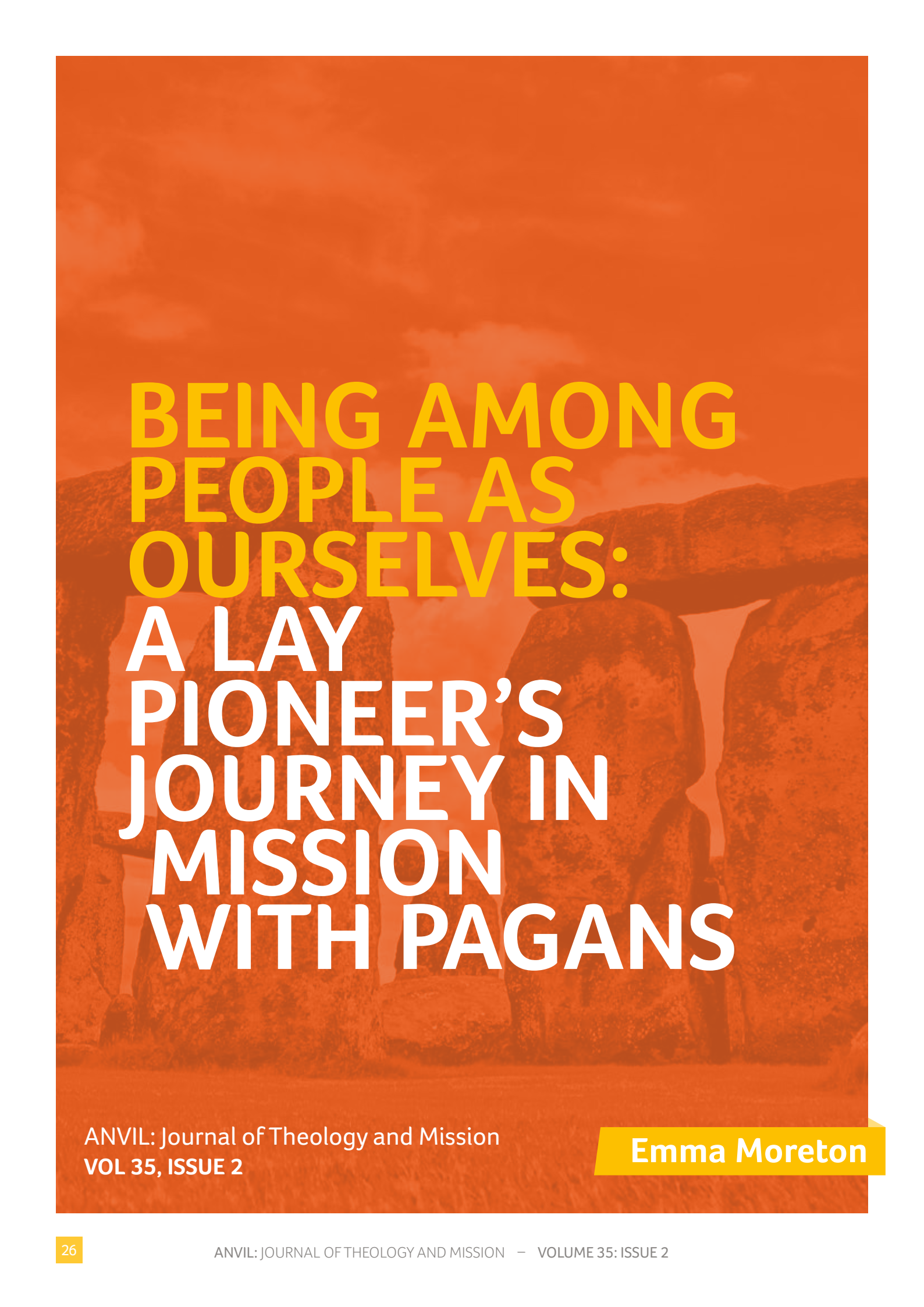
The Revd Diana Greenfield is currently Avalon pioneer minister and diocesan adviser for new religious movements based in Glastonbury. She trained as an evangelist with Church Army and was commissioned in 2000 to be the first full-time night club chaplain in the UK. She studied for ordination as a pioneer with St Mellitus College and King’s College London. She is currently a tutor for the “Bible in context” module on the CMS lay pioneer certificate in the Bath and Wells diocese.



¹² G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (Pantianos Classics, 1910), 25–26.

¹³ Miranda Bromley, *A Hint Half Guessed – Accessing an Embodied Way of Knowing in Coaching Practice* (MA diss., South Bank University, 2017).

¹⁴ NRSV.



BEING AMONG PEOPLE AS OURSELVES: A LAY PIONEER'S JOURNEY IN MISSION WITH PAGANS

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

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BEING AMONG PEOPLE AS OURSELVES: A LAY PIONEER'S JOURNEY IN MISSION WITH PAGANS

As I think about the subject of spiritual but not religious it seems quite fitting that I am in a field alongside a couple of hundred other festival traders setting up their pitches for The Sussex Faerie Festival.

My stall, The Henna and Hat Lady, specialises in handmade Steampunk, Gothic alternative hats and headdresses and bespoke henna tattoos. Tomorrow, in excess of 2,000 people will arrive with wings and glittery faces ready for a weekend of music, friendship, creativity and probably a fair amount of alcohol. Among the traders offering handmade goods there are a multitude of spiritual readers and experiential workshops with shamanic drumming, wand making and the like. On arriving at the festival we were handed a bunch of Magical Times magazines and Faerie passports. On flicking briefly through the magazines there are articles on “Spells and charms”, “Old craft for a new generation”, “The Wise woman”, “My tribe”, “Animal totems and the gemstone kingdom”, “Your inner therapist”, “Sun magic”, “Healing plants of the ancient druids”, “Chakras – our emotional centres of being”, “The art of living a magikal life”, “Magical power words”, and other such titles. These titles indicate that there is a search and a hunger for meaning for there to be more than the everyday realities most of us live with.

There is an undeniable gulf between that which is viewed as “religion” – in very simplistic terms meaning the structured institution and culture of church and Christianity – and “spiritual”, which is less bound by rules, rigidity and traditions, more inclusive, tolerant and “alive”.

A druid friend of mine who runs a local Grove¹ responded to my asking him his thoughts on what it means to be spiritual not religious: “To put simply? To me, religion is organised like a church, mosque, etc. There are leaders and an established set of beliefs that you follow. A spiritual path is perhaps more fluid. As a Pagan on the Druid path I consider myself on a spiritual journey but I have no religion. You can be spiritual and not religious. You can also be religious and spiritual.

They are not exclusive. Spirituality is your journey and how you follow your beliefs. Religion is a set of beliefs.”

BRIDGING THE GULF

Working with people of other faith paths and spiritualities requires great sensitivity and authenticity. It involves being willing to dance in the gap between worlds that struggle to connect and loving people as friends. Our friends who may describe themselves as spiritual not religious can be very suspicious of “the institution”. We have spent hours listening to people talking about their historic struggle with “church” and it seems most people would discount the Christian faith in terms of not being spiritually alive, vibrant and inclusive. There is rather large a gulf to bridge here.

If we are looking as Christians to meaningfully engage with people who are on other faith paths the key is connection. People want to know they are respected, heard and valued as they are. For example, with Pagans it is rare to hear anything being imposed. This is mainly due to there being no written creed or rules as such. It is much more about togetherness and various threads of belief and practice being woven together to form an inclusive and diverse picture.

People have a very sharp radar as to whether someone is genuinely interested in them and offering friendship and connection or whether they looking to impose something on them as an evangelistic target. My husband and I have worked for over 30 years with people who may roughly come under the umbrella of “Pagan”. This word can incorporate a broad range of spiritualities and faith paths. For ease, I will refer to “Pagan” unless specifying a particular group.

Our journeying and connection with the Pagan community in the UK tends to raise two reactions. The first (most common one) is the eyebrow raising and brow furrowing among certain Christian groups and individuals who look at where we go, who we hang out with and how we look, and come to certain conclusions. The second group, however, are those who look on and ask how we do it and how to connect with a group of people so outside of the church. Our response is that we are not going into anything with an agenda. We genuinely love these folks, we want to hang out with them and it is a mutual friendship.

When we were at Bible College (about 26 years ago) there were various courses on evangelism. It was quite noticeable that most of these courses would present a formula or programme which would maybe use a set of questions or something similar as a tool to engage people to talk about God. I have to confess this always

¹ A term for a group or community of druids.

felt very alien and uncomfortable as our gut feeling is that connecting with people is about actual real relationship. I can't bear it when I get religious door knockers or am accosted on the street by people either putting the fear of God and hell in people or trying to convert me. They don't want to know me, or want to hear from me.

My husband, Glyn, and I previously spent around 14 years overseas as mission workers. We loved our work in the at risk sector with vulnerable and marginalised people, we loved our neighbourhood and joining in with community life, we loved living and being there as ourselves and attempting to immerse ourselves and join in. We didn't love evangelistic strategy meetings with our mission agency teams, or evangelistic tools and the focus being often on "people becoming Christians". Please don't misunderstand me! We want people to know Jesus, we want to see individuals and neighbourhoods impacted and transformed. It just felt uncomfortable for us doing this in any way other than friendship and the long haul of learning about people and beginning to share life together. It sometimes felt we were there to impose something rather than being organic and demonstrating the love of God through simply living it out. Of course we had conversations about faith and Jesus, but these would come about as an overflow of friendship and connecting. There was no short cut mission plan. It was the long haul of knowing and being known – person to person.

I love how it is expressed in The Message "*The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood*" (John 1:14). Incarnational mission, the way of immersing yourself as fully as possible into the cultural context you are in. Jesus came on a mission, with a message – absolutely. How did he do it? By moving in, moving among, being one with, sharing life, one of the community. He impacted people by demonstration – how he spoke, how he interacted, how his relationship with his Father overflowed and breathed on to those around him. The religious authorities hated him because he was with the people rather than outside of the people. Unwieldy, unruly, unpredictable, unholy according to some, because of the people he spent time with and the things he did that rubbed the rulers up the wrong way. There was no professional distance between him and humanity. He was in touching distance, close enough to share jokes and break bread, draw with his finger in the dirt, have his feet rubbed by a woman's hair. In John 10:10 Jesus says, "I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness" (GNB). This fullness of life wasn't something to be imposed but was demonstrated by Jesus to those around him – in the present moment. Fullness of life was being with

the people, healing, sharing life, miracles, hearing the stories, being present and engaging with all humanity from the heart.

I wonder if what challenges and sometimes unsettles people is that we seem too close, too involved and we look too similar to those we journey with and love. It would be easier if there was a bit of distance, if we looked less like those we are among and if we were evangelising and sharing the gospel in programmes they knew, rather than being friends and sharing life with them. But for us, anything other than friendship, mutual conversation, back and forth listening and respecting, and willingness to break down barriers and walls is not authentic friendship. Over the years we have seen various teams come in and do some intensive outreach mission and then leave. While it is well intended, when you are journeying with a fragile and often misunderstood and vilified group this can leave a trail of emotional and spiritual mopping up and apologising needing to happen.

TRACTS AND TRUST

A few years back we were at a local event which was marking "Lammas".² It is often celebrated by the Pagan community in creative ways and this event was open to the public, and along with music, beer tents and stalls included a Lammas ritual. Some local Christians view this as a "dark" event and describe it as dodgy, demonic, Satanic or evil. This is sad as people hear what is said and see disapproving looks. They get offended when they are branded as evil. On this particular occasion my husband and I were working on my Henna and Hat Lady stall and a couple of ladies came by and threw a handful of evangelistic tracts at us showering everyone in the stall in a confetti of bible verses and the like. We apologised to our stall customers and caught up with the ladies to gently suggest they perhaps think about a more relational way connect with these folks as people.

Another example would be an event which happens once a year in the UK. It is reported to be the largest gathering of witches and Pagans. My husband and I go along to this event with our stall and love being there as we have done this for years and got to know many of the people who attend. There is however a bit of a joke at the beginning of each event and it is "what are the Christians going to do this year on our way in?" Basically, every year there will be a group of Christians that line the entrance to the event. Over the years they have shouted warfare type prayers, offered tea and soup, given out Bibles, handed out tracts and last year it was chocolate bars wrapped in a tract. Our friends

² Lammas is one of the festival sabbats in the Pagan year, celebrating the beginning of harvest season.

inside know my husband and I are “Jesus people” and many of them said to us, “Why don’t they just come in if they are wanting to talk to us?” Another person said, “This isn’t about us as human beings – this is about being branded and judged. They aren’t doing this anywhere else, are they?” This kind of practice ends up highlighting the gulf between, rather than bridging the gap.

Going back to the question of how we do it, I think the answer is remarkably simple and not spectacular. It is about being among people – as ourselves. There is nothing flashy, no formula, no set of questions or pocket full of tracts, just being Jesus people and wanting the overflow of that to spill out in beautiful non-contrived ways to other people. Hosting spaces and making ourselves people of hospitality in every setting is so key whether at a festival, event, in the pub, or, hopefully, in our churches.

I feel this is beautifully expressed by Henri Nouwen:

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.³

The people we journey with are usually spiritually open and we have some great conversations about experience and share stories of things that happen. People practise their spirituality in different ways and so it is not unusual to talk about the supernatural. The work of the Spirit makes sense in this environment. I often get words of knowledge for people. I might be sitting at a festival and it is like I get a nudge and God says, “See that person over there? I want you to go and talk to them”. I will simply approach them and say, “My name is Emma, I am a follower of Jesus and he talks to me and sometimes gives me something to say to people. Would you like me to tell you?” Nobody has ever said no to date, and normally the response is quite profound as it will be something quite specific and personal. After a conversation, and perhaps praying for the person if they want me to, I would say something like, “The reason this has happened is because it is important for you to know that you are known, loved and your life matters to God”.

People are always watching. My husband and I are frequent visitors to our local pub where we have built friendship with the locals and staff. We don’t go in shouting about our faith or anything like that, we go there to chat, share life and have a nice glass of

Sauvignon. Last week, however, one of the bar staff came up to me and asked if she could talk to me, I said of course. She said, “I didn’t know who else to talk to as it sounds so strange but I think I can say this and you won’t think I am crazy”. One thing my life has taught me is that very few things are weird or crazy! She disappeared and brought back a pair of shoes. She said “I was bought these to wear for a wedding and when they arrived I put them on the bar. Someone told to me that it is very bad luck to put new shoes on a bar as it causes a curse. I felt very cold when they said this and have worn them twice and am now afraid as really bad things have happened”. By this point she was quite distressed and shaky and we had a little crowd of interested regulars. I said to her “I don’t think you are weird or crazy, but you are definitely afraid. It says in the Bible that at the name of Jesus every knee must bow – in heaven, and on earth, and of those under the earth. That means Jesus is the authority and has the name that is above and bigger than anything that may have attached itself to these shoes. So, if you want, I can pray in the name of Jesus for you and these shoes. She did and the locals bowed their heads too as I prayed.” And then they picked up their pints and carried on chatting and I sipped my wine. Being Jesus people is about being ourselves. People notice, listen, watch and make their conclusions about who we are. It is also very important that we listen with intent to what people are saying. Were the shoes cursed? Had bad things happened because she put them on the bar? No idea. It was clear however she was afraid and this mattered. If I had said, “Well that’s just silly – of course your shoes aren’t cursed!” that would have dismissed her fears and probably shut the door on her feeling able to talk to me again. The shoe conversation enabled her to open up about her anxiety and other factors. It is so important to respond to people where they are at, not to discount another’s experiences or feelings and to always respond with openness and compassion to make sure they feel heard and taken seriously.

STONES, DRUMSTICKS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

I would like to finish this article with a very recent story. For me it is in story and experience that I am learning about God’s heart for those people who may think of themselves as outside of the institution. I think in God’s eyes they are very much “in”.

There are times when something happens that you can’t easily put into words. I have related it to a couple of people and tried my best to describe it, but so far it all feels unsatisfactory. However, because memories

³ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City NY: Doubleday) 71.

fade and the moment of wonder can become misty, I am going to attempt to share it because I don't want to lose it. My only concern is that it sounds about me – it isn't. This is simply my account of an experience that I happened to be a part of and, God willing, a bigger story!

Thursday 20 June was Summer Solstice Eve. Myself, my son Sam and our drumming group (along with about 15,000 other people) descended upon Stonehenge. We stayed on Stonehenge campsite which is just down the road from the stone circle. It was full of people there to celebrate the solstice. There was a party/festival atmosphere with a lot of the usual “accompanying factors”, but all very chilled and good natured. Around 9pm the free public service buses arrived at the campsite to transport all of us to the stones, about 10 minutes away.

On arriving at Stonehenge we all piled out of the buses and made our way to the stones. There were very strict entry rules – we were frisked twice, and no blankets or sleeping bags were allowed unless you were wearing them as an outfit! No alcohol was allowed to be brought onto or sold on the site – a very good thing in my opinion, as it could have been very messy in terms of revelry and risk with so many super-hyped people. The clouds of weed though were something to behold!

It was quite a privilege because our drumming group was the only group allowed to actually officially perform there, as we are trusted and respected by Pagan communities. So once off the bus we made our way to the centre of the stones and drummed. The space inside the stones is actually not that big. It was rammed with people – we were being jostled and bumped and it was quite intense! So many people all trying to get to the centre of the stones. The noise level can only be described as a permanent goal being scored at a football match with drums, whooping, whistling, cheering, dancing and people yelling. After about 30 minutes of drumming, our group battled our way out of the stones and found a place to huddle on the floor for a bit.

We drummed a couple more times outside the stones and re-huddled in between (it gets pretty chilly overnight!). We had been there about four hours when things got interesting for me. Around 1am I felt stirred or spiritually nudged. I got Sam and a couple of others and said to them we needed to go to the centre of the stones. No fuss, no questions, they just got up and came with me.

We battled our way in. It was crazily crushed in the middle and deafening. We drummed for a minute or so (our tiny troop of four people – barely audible above the noise!) and then I can only describe it as I

heard God saying “Now!” I raised my drumstick and said “Everybody!” I don't know how, I can't explain it (neither can the others), but the whole place went silent. Impossibly silent for a crowd of thousands. I hadn't planned this – it wasn't premeditated. I opened my mouth and said “My name is Emma and I am a lay pioneer worker in the Church of England. I want to say that I am sorry to any of you who have felt rejected, judged, not welcome in the Church. You are known. You are loved. I am so sorry if this message has become lost. Everyone is welcome, everyone is in.” People cried, cheered, hugged.

Our little group of four then drummed for another minute and then I held the drumstick up again and said, “Everybody!” The whole place went silent again and I said “There are people here who need to forgive parents. Parents who were absent, parents who perhaps didn't manage to give their best and have left you wounded. Family fractures need fixing. We need to be people of forgiveness”. The whole place then cheered and there were tears. Again, this was not pre-planned at all.

We drummed then for another minute and I again raised the drumstick. It went silent and I said “Our planet is fractured with division and suspicion of the Other. If we unite, if we allow the stranger to become a friend, if we recognise our oneness in humanity, if we join together – the walls will come down, the barriers will drop. We need to become a prophetic people who live this out. Demonstrate that a better way is possible. Stonehenge is an epicentre of spirituality. This is the very place to start sending out a message of oneness. We are called to be people of Spirit and live prophetic lives. We need to be the change we want to see.” People spontaneously joined hands there were again tears. I can't describe it but a note sounded from people, around people, it was an amazing resonant noise! As it got louder people started to jump up and down and cheer.

After this our group of four slowly made our way back to the other drummers who were outside. It was a challenge getting out as we were being grabbed, hugged, people shouting, “We are the prophets to the nations!” (meaning them – the crowds). It was surreal. When we got back to the rest of the group, the leader of our group said “What on earth was happening? It went silent and then you could only hear one voice and it was crystal clear around the whole place.”

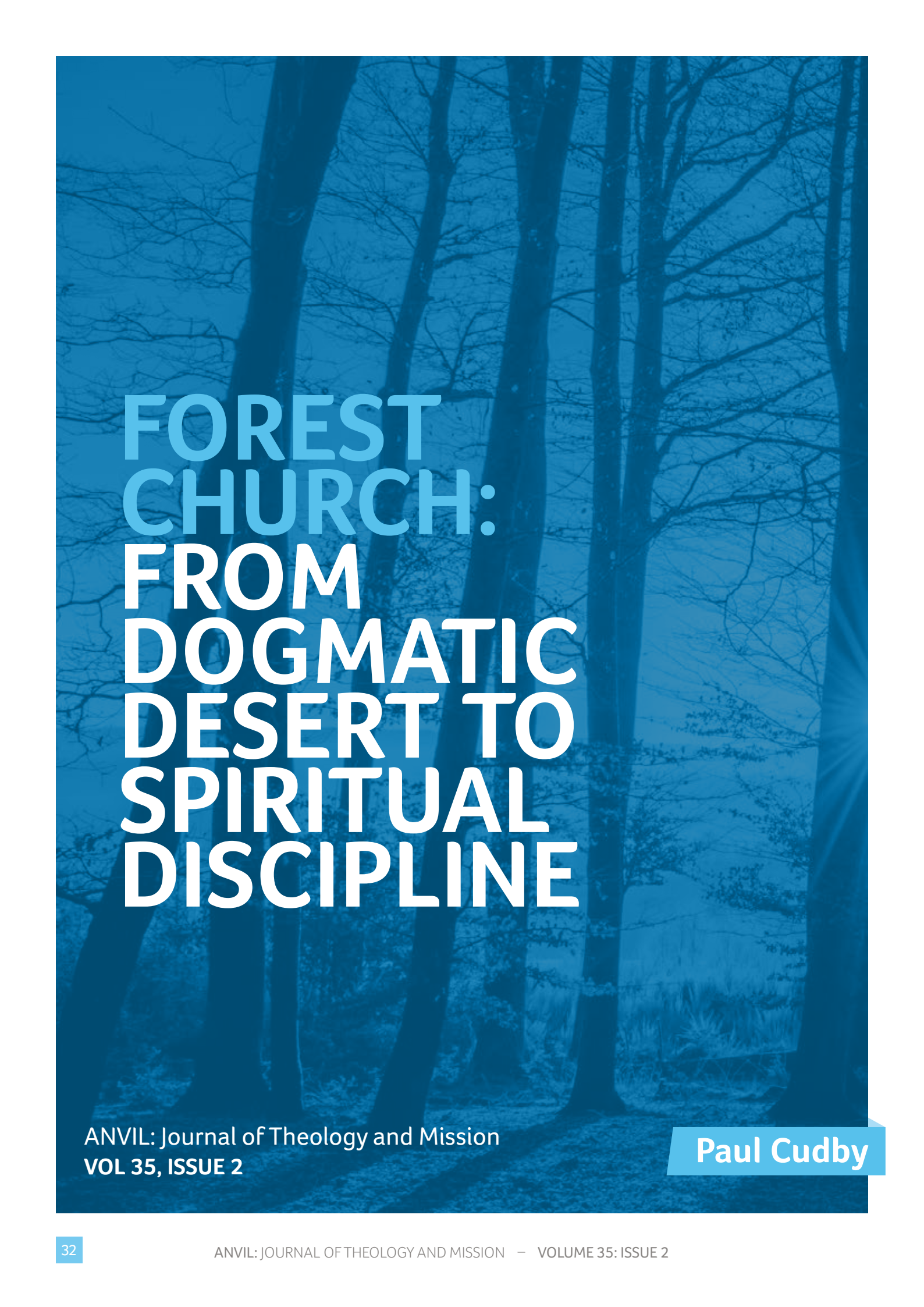
So there it is. No way of really describing, explaining, understanding how it happened. I am massively relieved there were witnesses who verify the whole account as it sounds unbelievable. I don't quite believe it myself. One person simply cannot silence a crowd of thousands making enough noise to shake Stonehenge – but it

happened. I am very aware that among all the party goers there are also many who may not have responded well to a mention of the Church in the middle of Stonehenge on Solstice Eve! But something good happened and I 100 per cent blame God!

My simple prayer from this experience is that for the person there who needed to know they are known and loved, or that person who has been crippled by unforgiveness and needs to perhaps forgive their parents, or whatever, that they have been met somehow in their place of need, hope or challenge. I am fairly confident that the majority of the “congregation” at Stonehenge on that night were most unlikely to have been in church the week before, so perhaps God wanted to get a word in? Who knows!

Emma Moreton is a CMS lay pioneer worker and co founder of the charity she runs with her husband “Kasama – Creating Safe Spaces”. Emma works with some key individuals in alternative spiritual communities looking at how new language and theology can be developed to accommodate those who find it hard to “fit in”. As someone often classed as “alternative” she knows well how hard it can be to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in many Christian settings. Emma is also an artist, activist and someone who will rock the boat and throw spanners in the works.





FOREST CHURCH: FROM DOGMATIC DESERT TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Paul Cudby

FOREST CHURCH: FROM DOGMATIC DESERT TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Behind us, a tall wellingtonia tree whispers her many-voiced leafy welcome. Beneath our feet, unknown numbers of crawling, squirming invertebrates wind their ways, oblivious to us. Blankets are passed around and hoods raised against the December solstice wind. The church some way behind us lights up with the choir practising their carols while we, on our rugs and picnic chairs, huddled in near silence, feel somehow “connected”. But being religious? For some here today, that’s what’s happening in the building behind us.

Or is it...?

INTRODUCTION – FACING THE QUESTION

How did we get here? I believe this is the first question we have to ask when engaging with how to meet the needs of those who declare themselves to be spiritual but not religious. If we are unable to understand why people feel that way, then we will be unable to serve them. To me it feels that the answer is found in the postmodern death of the metanarrative. We live in an era where trust in any large institution has been eroded, yet people seem as thirsty, if not more so, for spiritual experience.

It is this understanding – that we crave an experience that is free from the constraints of a dogmatic institution – that dictates the path of modern spirituality and probably helps to explain the growing reluctance of ordinary people to engage with the church.

There is, however, a danger associated with abandoning religion. If the experience becomes the aim then the individual may flit from one path to another, always hoping for the next “hit”. Spirituality risks becoming a drug rather than a path and the experience is the end in itself rather than the divine encounter that can be life-changing. When it’s at its best, religion can be the framework on which we hang our spirituality in order to provide a space for discipline and growth. However, it has become abundantly clear that current religious frameworks are perceived, sadly often not without cause, as a series of “Thou shalt nots” designed to exclude rather than include. Maybe this repeating pattern is why John the Baptist offered baptism for the forgiveness of sins when there was already a perfectly functional, priestly ministered, sacrifice for that in the

Temple. Yet John’s path was one of discipline, not merely spiritual experiences. Have we lost that with the death of our desire for all that is “religion”?

In order to find a way through this and try and step away from the errors we seem to keep repeating in organised religion, it is necessary to ask what needs to be jettisoned in order to create a new framework that is fit for purpose and with which people can engage. In order to serve the spiritual, our “religion” led by “experts” needs to be replaced with a supporting community that travels together. The leader must become the accompanier and trust in rules must be replaced with trusting the Spirit to lead people towards being changed. Numerous emerging communities are looking to this model, one of which is Forest Church (although bear in mind that this is a loosely connected network – not an organisation with rules).

FOREST CHURCH AS ONE MODEL AMONG MANY

My wife, Alison Eve, and I have been part of a core group of five who have run Ancient Arden Forest Church (AAFC) since 2012. AAFC fills a particular niche, being Christ-focused but ritualistic and looking more pagan than churchy from a cultural perspective, which has meant that we have operated at or beyond the fringe of what most churches would feel happy with. Maybe half of those who come would feel uncomfortable in “normal” church, with visiting Wiccans and Druids not being uncommon. However, I felt that this touching place was too far beyond the fringe for many people who self-define as spiritual but not religious, and was also not “owned” by the parish church of which I am vicar. (I should add that this was intentional on our part so that AAFC did not have to conform to the expectations of “religious” outsiders.)

It was for this reason that I felt it was necessary to adopt a new approach alongside AAFC, and launch a new, more parish-based, forest church, simply called The Arden Forest Church (TAFC). Following in the contemplative footsteps of our monthly Celtic night prayer service, The Well, this was to be a dogma-free zone, always meeting in the round with no dog collars or signs of officialdom. There would be no excluding creeds nor any overtones that spoke of religious rules. All would be welcomed into a reflective outdoor space that would meet monthly, whatever the weather, reminding people of the old saying, “There is no such thing as the wrong weather, only the wrong clothes.”

After a couple of trial runs over the gloriously hot summer of 2018 where 20 to 30 people came to enjoy prayer in the late afternoon sun, with the support of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) we formally launched on

the fourth Sunday of October 2018, with our regular slot of “4th Sunday at 4” replacing the prayer book evensong on that evening that had dwindled to maybe two or three plus leader and organist. The timing, adopting the fourth Sunday, means that a third of our gatherings (never called “services”!) lie at or close to solstices and equinoxes, allowing us specific observations of seasonal turning points.

Each gathering follows, for the time being, a similar pattern. We meet in a circle next to a tall Wellingtonia tree in our large rural churchyard, where we can easily be found by newcomers. Given that the tree is at the east end of the church and the steeple is at the west end, it allows us to explain that we gather by nature’s tower rather than the one built by human hands. Some people bring folding chairs, others bring picnic blankets. The “liturgy” follows closely, and is inspired by, Tess Ward’s excellent resource, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*,¹ although we alter the prayers to make them responsorial. So we begin with an opening prayer and words of praise. We then keep five minutes of silence to, quoting Tess, “Be still in the silence and aware of the Love with and within...” We suggest people might like, if they are unused to this, to close their eyes initially and count five separate sounds, allowing those to lead them into a deeper state of prayerful awareness of their surroundings.

From this state of alert stillness a meditation is given that will incorporate a Bible reading, but this is usually chosen for its connectedness to the season rather than necessarily following the revised common lectionary. The meditation leads us into at least 10 minutes of silent response where the gathered people are sent out into the churchyard to look for things in the natural world that reflect what they sense in themselves from what they have heard. For example, in November 2018 we read of the struggle Jacob had with the angelic/divine stranger at the riverside and then went into the space looking for signs of struggle in the natural world such as a gravestone being slowly overcome by moss and plants. The “call-back” is a singing bowl, which is chimed three times before “singing”. On this occasion, when we regathered in the circle people were given a chance to comment on what they had seen, from which we then reflected that back into the struggles that we or our loved ones might be facing at the time, including wrestling with God. I never cease to be amazed at the willingness of people to share in that environment and it has been through this sharing that the community is forming. When community forms, it helps people move beyond seeking a spiritual experience to the discipline of returning and developing.

After sharing we return to silence, opening a thanksgiving space with:

Leader As I end this day in your safe-keeping

All I count three blessings before my sleeping.

The gathering concludes with some other form of responsorial prayer, including a space for silent intercession (although that’s not a word we would use) and a blessing. We normally find that it takes a little while after that before people are ready to leave, although many of us then adjourn to the pub over the road from us to continue being together. Comments about the reluctance to leave speak volumes about how people feel about this type of gathering.

BORROWING FROM “RELIGIOUS” TO PRODUCE A DEEPER “SPIRITUAL”

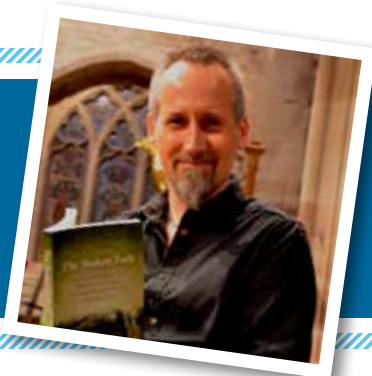
On the face of it, how different is this from church for it not to be tarred with the “religious” brush? In part it is because we always meet outside but there are other aspects too, since just doing “normal” church outside can never truly be called “Forest Church”. The language, including the language about God, is always inclusive. Pronouns are rarely used of God to avoid the standard masculinising of the divine, and, following Tess Ward’s practice, the meditations will often use a title rather than a divine name, such as “Living Presence”. This kind of open language permits people from all kinds of spiritual path to place a meaning with which they are content on what we say. Furthermore, there are never any robes or accoutrements of institution, so not even a dog collar. The liturgical framework is present but, unlike so many of the more traditional liturgies, no attempt is made to crowbar in doctrinal statements. Given that the name of God is “I am”, we leave people to have their own encounters. Of course those of us with leadership responsibilities make ourselves available to help explorers go deeper with their questioning and their journeys, but the responsibility is with them to ask because the model of “religion” tends to be to impose truths that must be believed rather than enable encounters that challenge and change us. It is enlightening to discover that liturgy can be divorced from being “religious” and regain its place in the eyes of some as “spiritual”. (One of the conclusions I drew in my book *The Shaken Path* about understanding modern paganism is that a significant proportion of modern pagans are ex-Christians who left the church because it wasn’t spiritual enough. Liturgy need not be the problem, but our use of it and the words may well be.)²


¹ Tess Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year: Celtic and Christian Seasonal Prayers* (Ropley, Hants: O Books, 2007).

² Paul Cudby, *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest’s Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice* (Alresford, Hants: Christian Alternative Books, 2017).

However, to return to where we began, the danger of the “spiritual but not religious” label is that it replaces spiritual discipline and commitment with a thirst for eclectic new experiences. Those of us who frequent Mind Body Spirit festivals often see a parade of people thirsting for the next spiritual “hit”. This is something that we must try to avoid. The Arden Forest Church seeks instead to tread a fine line that provides a relational framework in which a contemplative spiritual experience can lead into a deeper commitment according to the place on the path that the individual occupies. The journey of each traveller is honoured with no pressure being placed on an “arrival” or crossing some in/out threshold. “Religion” risks being about rules regarding who is in and who is out; “spiritual” risks being about chasing the experience, but by blending the two we can produce new forms of spiritual discipline, and it is by adopting these that real change can come. It is all too easy to declare that we are “spiritual but not religious” but unless we tap into the better part of the discipline that religion can offer as well, our new forms of worship risk being just another “hit” that the spiritual traveller can dip into when they feel like it before moving on. Our aim at The Arden Forest Church is to bring the discipline that religion at its best can offer into a spiritual space so that an ongoing encounter with Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit in the natural world, becomes life-changing and life-long.

The Revd Paul Cudby is vicar of Tanworth in Arden, the bishop of Birmingham’s adviser for new religious movements and the author of *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest’s Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice*. He is currently working on developing a more in-depth theology of his experiences of Forest Church for his next book.





THE ROLE OF MYTH AND IMAGINATION WITHIN CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND THEIR USE IN MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Matthew Arnold

THE ROLE OF MYTH AND IMAGINATION WITHIN CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND THEIR USE IN MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role imagination and myth play within Christian literature and how Christians can engage in a positive spiritual dialogue with those who hold them in high regard, with particular reference to neopagans, as this group form part of the author's ministry.

Two main Christian literary authors are engaged with in this paper: J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, with passing references to G. K. Chesterton. These were chosen due to their common interest in myth and the imagination, and because their works are highly regarded, not only by Christian but also by non-Christian readers. Combined, their works have sold worldwide in their millions and been translated into successful radio, television and film series. Birzer comments on Tolkien, "Outside of the scriptural authors, he may be the most widely read Christian author of our time."¹

Myth and imagination are explored as missional engagement tools; in particular, how they were used by Tolkien to transform Lewis's understanding of myth as pointers leading to Christ, the *True Myth*, and leading to Lewis's conversion to Christianity. Their use is also explored in unlocking opportunities to deepen one's understanding of the mysteries of God for those within the Christian faith as well as providing a good basis for engagement with neopagans, many of whom utilise them in part of their worship practices.

In the final section of this paper, and building upon the understanding of myth and imagination, their role within the discipline of Christian apologetics will be explored, with particular regard to engaging in ministry

among neopagans. It will be shown that while myth and imagination used collectively in "imaginative apologetics" is a good starting point, there is still a need for traditional, propositional apologetics in this field of Christian witness.

Imagination is "The faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.... The ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful."² This creativity and super-sensory nature of the imagination will be explored as part of the paper.

Myth is "A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.... A widely held but false belief or idea.... A misrepresentation of the truth.... A fictitious or imaginary person or thing."³ The first definition is utilised by Chesterton, Lewis and Tolkien, and their literary approach to myth will be investigated through this lens.

It should be noted that the use of the term "fairy-story" in this paper refers to mythic stories and does not necessarily mean a story about fairies per sé. As Tolkien states, "fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories *about* fairies or elves, but stories *about* Fairy, that is *Faërie*... *Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky and the earth, and all things that are in it"⁴. His interchangeable usage of Fairy and *Faërie* (both capitalised) therefore do not describe a single, diminutive entity in another realm.

THE BLESSED LEGEND-MAKERS

Redeeming myth and imagination

Purtill regards myths as "stories of gods or heroes that usually had a religious or moral purpose"⁵ and Chesterton extols the virtues of myth using this form of definition, saying, "many noble and healthy principles... arise from them [fairy tales]."⁶

This change of emphasis taken by those who see value in myth suggests a broader emphasis, one that gets to the heart of myth itself – the perception of reality at a deeper level. As Kilby states, "A myth is indeed to be defined by its very power to convey essence rather

¹ Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 136.

² "Imagination," *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed 25 June 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/imagination>.

³ "Myth," *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed 25 June 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/myth>.

⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", in *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 11–79.

⁵ Richard L. Purtill, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 1.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, "The Ethics of Elfland" in *Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee: Cavalier Books, 2015), 46.

than outward fact, reality rather than semblance, the genuine rather than the accidental. It is the difference between the factual announcement of a wedding and the ineluctable joys actually incorporated in the event.”⁷ It will be shown that myth and imagination provide a framework in which deeper truths and an appreciation of life in all its fullness can be grasped.

From “Misomythus” to “Philomythus”

Prior to his conversion from theism to Christianity, Lewis, being well versed in mythic literature from an early age,⁸ regarded myths as “lies... breathed through silver”.⁹

Ward comments upon Lewis’s Protestant upbringing, stating his teachers had taught him “Christianity was 100% correct and every other religion, including the pagan myths of ancient Greece and Rome, was 100% wrong”.¹⁰ However, for Lewis, this didn’t seem sensible and he “abandoned his childhood faith ‘largely under the influence of classical education’”.¹¹ Like many neopagans today, he had been fascinated by the stories of gods who died and rose again teaching truths about life in this world, whether they be the dying and rising corn god whose death resulted in fertility for the land the following year, or the death and resurrection of the Norse god Balder. He treated Christianity as merely another of those myths and “even if he were to accept the historicity of the Christian story... he could not understand how the death and resurrection of Christ were relevant to humanity”.¹² Indeed, “How could the death and resurrection of Christ have ‘saved the world’?”¹³ Lewis was well on the journey towards the One who was speaking to him through his love of myth, although, like some of the Athenians at St Paul’s sermon (Acts 17:32), he struggled with the resurrection of humans.

Lewis’s view on myth dramatically changed during the course of one famous conversation between Tolkien, Lewis and Hugo Dyson in September 1931. The arguments presented by Tolkien in particular

had a profound impact upon him and his conversion to Christianity followed swiftly afterwards. The conversation, recorded by Carpenter and which had begun with the topic of myth and metaphor, saw Lewis explaining that because the myths that he was so interested in were untrue, he did not believe in them. Myths were “lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver” to which Tolkien replied, “No... *They are not lies.*”¹⁴ Tolkien then explained that the inanimate objects we see around us, trees, stars and other objects, were once viewed as alive by our ancestors, who held them to be “mythological beings... the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music”.¹⁵ After further conversation, Tolkien explained that humans draw their ultimate ideals from God, and this includes our imagination originating in God, which “must, in consequence reflect something of eternal truth... [by creating myth] a person is actually fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light”.¹⁶ Tolkien’s argument continued further, explaining that Christianity’s myth had “a *real* Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become fact. But it still retains the character of myth”.¹⁷ Lewis’s appreciation of story could be applied to Jesus, and “he could draw nourishment from it which he could never find in a list of abstract truths... Could he [Lewis] not realise that it is a myth, and make himself receptive to it?”¹⁸ Tolkien’s understanding of myth mirrors that of St Paul in Athens, who used the pagan poets of the past to point to their fulfilment in the historical person of Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

Lewis was now able to see the essence of Christianity as tied to the story of Christ, that it could be viewed as one views pagan myths,¹⁹ but saw the Christ story as a true myth, compared to pagan myths, which were men’s myths. “In paganism, God expressed himself in an unfocused way through the images which human imaginations deployed in order to tell stories to the world.”²⁰ Lewis then located God’s mythic story of Christ in the historically verifiable world of the ancient near

⁷ Clyde S. Kilby, *A Well of Wonder: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and The Inklings* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2016), 27.

⁸ Michael Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics,” in Andrew Davison, *Imaginative Apologetics* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 66.

⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), 43.

¹⁰ Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

east. “For Lewis, pagan myths amounted to a similar sort of Christo-typical preconfiguration,”²¹ echoing St Paul’s approach in Athens, and which has bearing on ministry among those for whom myth holds great importance, as we shall later see.

“Once Lewis converted to Christianity, in no small part due to Tolkien’s influence, he specifically admired Tolkien’s mythology for its Christian essence.”²² Lewis began to endorse myth, as shown in one review of *The Lord of the Rings*: “The value of myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores them to rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’.”²³ This shows his change of heart towards myth and provides us with a key to unlock and explore the deeper meaning and truths within mythic narratives, whether they’re familiar stories from the Bible or myths such as the dying and rising god of the neopagans. Lewis expanded upon this further in “Myth Became Fact”:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact, it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.²⁴

Thus it is important to learn from Tolkien and Lewis’s conversation when engaging with those who understand Jesus as merely another mythic character; one to be added to their collection of received myths, but standing apart in the verifiable truth of it. Their myths may sound strange to our ears but by listening carefully, we may well be able to find those veiled images of Christ, then, in a similar way to St Paul, affirm those images and point them to Christ.

SANCTIFYING GODLESS MYTHS

Tolkien’s view of mythology was later shared in his 1939 lecture “On Fairy-Stories”. He regarded myth and fairy-stories as having a firm basis in reality, not disconnected from it, saying, “It [Faërie] holds the seas, the sun, the

moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.”²⁵ Myths are therefore not limited to purely fantastical, innovative creations, cut loose from the restraints of a reasonable world; they still contain that which is by necessity not imaginable, as Chesterton claims: “You cannot *imagine* one and two not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit... [or] growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail.”²⁶ By this, he implies that although myths and fairy-stories make use of the imagination, they still contain necessary, reasonable assumptions that are based in reason found in our own, mundane world.

Birzer describes Tolkien as believing that “even pagan myths attempted to express God’s greater truths”, but that “myth could be dangerous, or ‘perilous’... if it remained pagan”.²⁷ While not overtly Christian, Tolkien’s legendarium follows in the steps of Christians of the past who attempted to sanctify, or baptise, pagan myths, keeping their flavour but reframing them within a Christian worldview. Examples of this practice are given by Birzer, including Christmas and Easter celebrations, St Augustine’s *City of God* (based on the works of Plato) and the positioning of church buildings upon former pagan worship sites.²⁸ These should serve as inspiration for Christians to continue taking a redemptive approach to pagan myth, as Tolkien did.

When we create mythologies, Tolkien claims we act as a “sub-creator”.²⁹ It is important to note here that he is not saying that we are creating ex nihilo, something Christians believe God is only capable of. He believed all humans, fallen though we may be, have the gift of sub-creation, because we are made by a Creator who has endowed us with that gift. He claimed that our use of the imagination in the creation of mythic literature has its source in our Creator.

Within both Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works, there is a creation account that anchors their mythical worlds. Tolkien’s creation account, *The Ainulindalë* (in *The Silmarillion*), and Lewis’s in *The Magician’s Nephew* have a single Being who is the source of creation ex nihilo. Lewis’s Creator being, Aslan, sticks closely to the traditional Christian understanding of God as being the source and shaper of all matter at the founding of

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Birzer, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Sanctifying Myth*, 33.

²³ C. S. Lewis, “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 138.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact” in *God in the Dock* (London: HarperCollins, 1979), 36.

²⁵ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 16.

²⁶ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 47.

²⁷ Birzer, *Sanctifying Myth*, xxiii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 28.

Narnia from the Nothing.³⁰ Taking a slightly different approach, Tolkien has a Creator being, *Ilúvatar*,³¹ making use of the sub-creator motif by tasking the *Ainur* to shape the created primordial matter.³² Tolkien and Lewis's sub-creations have their foundations in a Being that created their world's *ex nihilo*, and who determines the laws of those realms.

Within their worlds we gain glimpses of Christ, whether it's Lewis's direct allegory in Aslan, or the partial Christ-like characters of Gandalf, Frodo and Aragorn who, according to Kreeft,³³ portray the roles of prophet, priest and king. What Lewis saw in pagan myths as a "Christo-typical preconfiguration"³⁴ has, thus, been used to great effect by Tolkien and Lewis in their works, threading them throughout with Gospel motifs.

Both authors also enlist the mythic happy ending, that which Tolkien calls the *eucatastrophe*,³⁵ which is achieved after a final battle, where good overcomes evil. For Lewis, this is recorded in final book in the *Narnia* series, *The Last Battle*; for Tolkien, it is the "Last Battle, and the Day of Doom".³⁶ The mirroring of the Christian understanding of the eschaton permeates their worlds, even to the very end of the old and beginning of the new.

Tolkien and Lewis's understanding of myth exemplified in their works are far from evil in nature and "godless". Their creation is based in Christian knowledge and understanding, which undergirds and permeates throughout them. They have ventured forth from the pagan stable of myth and its inherent dangers into the light of Christ, transformed into something that allows access to a deeper understanding of humanity, our creation, and our Creator.

Christianity has always embedded itself within the numerous cultures found throughout the world, meeting the various myths each of them has. St Paul's delivery to the Areopagus in Acts 17 took pagan teachings (from the works of Aratus, Epimenides and Menander) and acts as a scriptural example for the value of myth. He had listened to the stories and ideas being shared, and used them in his own sermon instead of refuting them as falsehoods. Starting with defining and referencing the Creator (as Tolkien and Lewis

did), in verse 24, he progressed on to show our place within the creation as children of God. He affirmed the observations their poets had made that God is not limited to a particular place but is present everywhere and accessible by everyone, not needing continual sacrifices, which, as Wright says, "should be seen as good news indeed".³⁷ St Paul then introduces them to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which has enabled God to do, as Wright states, "what he must do if he is the good and wise creator; he will set the world right, will call it to account".³⁸ This is the happy ending, the *eucatastrophe* of the Gospel message for the whole world. By incorporating into their myths a creation with purpose and meaning, which builds up to a conclusion that brings their worlds from a tragic fallen state into fullness, Tolkien and Lewis echo the shape of St Paul's reasoning, using myth and metaphor as carriers for the truths of God that are found throughout every culture.

APOLOGETICS OF THE HEAD AND HEART

In this final section we explore the role that myth and imagination have in sharing the gospel message with those whose own faith path makes heavy use of the myth and imagination, in particular to part of my own ministry context, the neopagan pathways.

Kilby observes that the huge popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* is possibly due to society's "desire to recover the Lost Myth... the myth of man's wholeness".³⁹ This ageless desire to discover our wholeness is still therefore present in society, having been stated by St Augustine of Hippo over 1,500 years earlier in his *Confessions, Book 1*: "you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you".⁴⁰ A longing for wholeness, peace, a desire to glimpse and connect with other realms, an "elfin" spiritual way of life that engages with the imaginal and celebrates beauty of nature and personal creativity: all these are in my own personal experience of ministry among neopagans, things that attract them to their particular spiritual pathway. Sadly their experience of church is often related as one of conflict, total certainty with black-and-white answers and conformity rather than individuality; to imagine another world is seen as

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 117–43.

³¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1989), 15–16.

³² Tolkien's first created spirit beings, possibly his equivalent to the *elohim* "Sons of God" found in Christian Scripture, but that is another paper altogether.

³³ Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: H. Shaw Publishers, 1989), 4.

³⁴ Ward, "The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best," 65.

³⁵ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 70.

³⁶ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 335.

³⁷ N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part 2 Chapters 13–28* (London: SPCK, 2008), 92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Kilby, *A Well of Wonder*, 221

⁴⁰ St Augustine, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1961), 21.

dangerous, unless it's only populated by God, angels and demons. How can the church reach out and engage creatively and imaginatively with this group of people who are spiritually seeking, and yet finding the church less than welcoming to their search?

To neopagans mythic literature is treated not as dogma from which to derive doctrinal statements, but as sacred texts from which to divine wisdom and teaching for their lives. Those who choose to follow the “old gods” of the British Isles make particular use of works such as the *Mabinogion*, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. From these, they derive their archetypal Celtic and northern European gods and goddesses, such as Arhianrhod, Bloddueuth, Ceridwen, Eostre, Freya, Rhiannon, Odin and Thor.⁴¹ Many of these stories are found in the songs of Damh the Bard, Pendragon (chief) of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids,⁴² capturing the ancient spirit, and an effective way of passing on knowledge through the celebration of creativity in song.

Tolkien's heavy borrowing from both the *Mabinogion* as observed by Day,⁴³ Shippey,⁴⁴ and the *Eddas*,⁴⁵ in particular, make him, in my experience, a favourite author among those who align with the gods and goddesses found within those works. Tolkien gives us an insight into the appeal of the mythic within paganism when he suggests fairy-stories have elements that existed in “ancient customs once practised in daily life, or of beliefs once held as beliefs and not ‘fancies’” and their “antiquity has an appeal in itself”.⁴⁶ There really were followers of Odin/Wodin and Thor in the northern Germanic/Scandinavian peoples, whose daily worship practices invoked the protection of their gods and goddesses, and there are those today who seek to reconnect with these “old gods”, rather than the “Christian God”.

Christians with an approach that is able to engage with myth and imagination in a positive manner as described earlier, and are able to resist following a reductionist approach to try and, like Lewis,⁴⁷ see through all things, will find ministerial engagement with neopagans fruitful. An approach to apologetics in this field that takes this nuance into account is required, and a traditional apologetics approach will make little headway initially,

due to the perceived overfamiliarity with many of the answers offered. An engagement with neopagans that utilises story, metaphor, imagination, myth and a re-enchantment of narrative will have a greater chance of being heard than mere reductionist doctrines and creedal statements, important though these are. In a letter to the Revd Henry Welbon, 18 September 1936, Lewis suggests “the only possible basis for Christian apologetics is a proper respect for paganism... Paganism must be ‘looked back at’ – *respected* – in order for the Christian apologist to see whether or how much it needs opposition.”⁴⁸ Following in the footsteps of St Paul mentioned earlier, we need to ask ourselves where good news can be found within old pagan myths that serve as pointers towards the Great Storyteller and, without belittling those sub-creations, proceed to take them beyond to an encounter with the Creator.

One Evangelical writer on Tolkien, Duriez,⁴⁹ suggests that “Evangelicals today tend to see the Bible only in terms of propositional truth, as if the Bible first and foremost encouraged looking at reality in a theoretical, systematic way”. In my own experience, a totally propositional-based apologetics finds itself up against resistance among neopagans, due to its tendency to drill down to doctrinal details while removing the sheer poetic beauty of the Creator whose work is being explained. “The trouble, says Lewis, is that we are so inveterately given to factualising Christian truth it is practically impossible for us to hear God when he says that one day he will give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun.”⁵⁰ Ryken claims that Christians have replaced that which was boldly imaginative writing by scriptural writers in the Gospels with theological abstraction.⁵¹ By inference, he suggests that the dissection of the work into doctrines has the potential to fall into the trap both Chesterton and Lewis spotted reductionists falling into. “Logic is one avenue of truth, however it is limited. Imagination as myth and storytelling is another avenue, but one that involves, disturbs and challenges us and as such is to be preferred...”⁵² For Lewis, doctrinal truths such as the atoning work of Christ and the Law of Moses were not presented as logical doctrinal statements, but were imaginatively presented through Aslan's sacrifice on the Stone Table, *Deep Magic* and *Deeper*

⁴¹ Ann-Marie Gallagher, *The Wicca Bible* (London: Bounty Books, 2011), 120–28.

⁴² “Biography,” *Damh the Bard*, accessed 6 July 2018, <https://www.paganmusic.co.uk/biography>.

⁴³ David Day, *Tolkien's Ring* (London: Pavilion, 2001), 82.

⁴⁴ Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 193–94.

⁴⁵ Birzer, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Sanctifying Myth*, 6.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 36.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Selected Works*, 429.

⁴⁸ Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 68.

⁴⁹ Colin Duriez, “The Theology of Fantasy in Lewis and Tolkien,” *Themelios* 23:2 (1998): 35.

⁵⁰ Kilby, *A Well of Wonder*, 28.

⁵¹ Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination*, 120–21.

⁵² William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 27.

Magic, weaving together his narrative interest and deep theology.⁵³ An approach that takes doctrine and presents it in such an imaginary way, using metaphors, opens up the conversation among those who are used to such ways of describing their beliefs.

However well-crafted the arguments for imaginative apologetics may be, they do not nullify the role of traditional apologetics, and reasoned argument still has an important place within all people groups. The Christian theologian Austin Farrer states: “Rational argument does not create belief [not even rational argument most richly and sensitively supplied by imagination], but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”⁵⁴ The *facts* of Jesus still need to be explored and shared with those who believe he is just another “good person” among other faith deities/leaders. Lewis did not jettison reason in favour of the imagination; he utilised *both*. Because of this, Ward claims he “is probably the most influential practitioner of Christian apologetics over the last hundred years”.⁵⁵ Certainly he is valued by a wide spectrum of Christian traditions. An effective approach to engagement with myth-loving people should emulate Lewis, using both imaginative and traditional apologetics, rather than only one, to engage their predisposition to myth and imagination.

In summary, in the use of imaginative apologetics with mythic literature, either Christian or otherwise, with a backing of reasoned, traditional apologetics, one has a missional toolkit that is effectual in engaging holistically with a person, honouring their intellect as well as their God-given imagination. Truths may be shared and explored in creative ways that allow deeper insights upon doctrines that could otherwise be seen as dry, familiar or irrelevant by some, and the journey into the mystery and wonder of the divine initiated.

CONCLUSION

Christian engagement with myth and imagination shouldn't be feared or demonised, due to only understanding them as falsehoods, but seen as a highly fruitful way of sharing the gospel message

among those for whom storytelling forms a core part of their being, whether it be via myths (both ancient and modern) or imaginative and creative approaches to portraying doctrinal truths. Rather than writing them off as totally wrong, those engaging in ministry among *philomythic* communities, such as neopagan ones, should take an approach similar to St Paul in Athens, seeking truth in pagan writings, as was Tolkien's approach when conversing with Lewis on the night he introduced him to the myth that was true. However beautiful the myths of those we minister among may be, we must encourage their followers to move beyond a purely theistic understanding of them by revealing their fulfilment in the work of the historical Jesus, just as Lewis moved from theism to Christianity through the realisation that he could treat the story of Jesus as just that – story, but grounded in reality. This requires knowledge of traditional apologetics for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but these should be presented not as purely doctrinal statements that can be argued over – they should be wrapped in the imagination, where the hearer is encouraged to step into a world that is both wonder-filled, enchanted and true.

Engagement with imagination follows in the footsteps of Jesus, who told fictional stories using imaginative metaphors such as doors, salt, mustard trees and sheep. The whole Bible is filled with metaphor, poetry and imagery reflecting the world as it truly is and allowing us to gain glimpses of the world beyond the physical – one only has to read the book of Revelation, where the imagination is encouraged through symbolic imagery to teach truths concerning the eschaton.

Those Christians with a gift in writing prose are therefore blessed in following a lineage of *philomythites* from St Paul to Tolkien, Lewis, and beyond, sub-creating creatively and imaginatively, and introducing their readers and listeners to the Creator of this mythic universe.

Bring on the Christian bards, for they are indeed blessed true legend-makers, bringing to mind the things that should never be lost, nor forgotten!

Matt Arnold is a lay pioneer minister for fresh expressions and has journeyed for the past 12 years as a follower of Christ among those engaged in new spiritualities (specifically New Age and neopagan) offering spiritual direction, food for thought, spiritual answers and contextual liturgy that points to Christ.



⁵³ Kilby, *A Well of Wonder*, 110.

⁵⁴ Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 78.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.



CASE STUDY

SPACE TO BREATHE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

Nicky Redsell

SPACE TO BREATHE

Spirituality is concerned with the human spirit, including what gives us identity and meaning, and allows us space to explore purpose and connections.

Non-religious spirituality does not locate itself within any particular religion or tradition. Space to Breathe, as the name suggests, is an organisation that was setup in a time-pressured, task-heavy culture to offer space for conversation and to offer an invitation to explore what spirituality means within the landscape of life. Its focus is on well-being, with non-religious spirituality as the main tool, looking to provide authentic, spiritual solutions to everyday problems. It seeks to inspire people to live well, live fully and live deeply. And everything potentially can offer the opportunity for encountering the spiritual.

One element of the work at Space to Breathe is the use of creative arts to address well-being. They provide a language for our thoughts and emotions when it's hard to speak things out loud or when what we really feel is hard to pin down. By way of example, we run a project offering creative well-being support to several businesses in the Sheffield area. To maintain confidentiality, business or organisation names have been omitted in the account below.

Businesses are given the chance to have an art installation brought to their workplace to stimulate conversations about well-being. These pieces are usually around A1 size and are created by local artists. They ask a simple well-being question through their artwork. The piece is accompanied by an activity that invites each person to respond and asks them to bring feedback or comments to the wider organisation.

One of the art pieces is "The Art of Connection". This involves a beautiful and original artwork by Sheffield artist Lucy Freeman. Lucy was given the challenge of coming up with a piece that asks questions of how we connect to others. How do I feel connected in the place I work? What enables me to feel valued? What is my role in the larger picture of my working life? These questions were inspired by the writing of Brené Brown as she describes the nature of connection. "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."¹ We were keen to invite people to explore their sense of value and connection, with particular attention to their working connections.

After Lucy had presented her concept, the Space to Breathe team created an activity to accompany the piece that was a jigsaw-themed response, picking up on Lucy's design. Printed on small pieces of jigsaw were words that aimed to encourage and inspire staff to know how important they are and that their organisation simply wouldn't be the same without them. These were positive values and the invitation to the staff teams was to choose a word that felt meaningful to them. These pieces were deliberately small enough to be taken away and kept as a source of encouragement. The questions Lucy had used as inspiration for her piece of art were also displayed for staff to consider. How do I feel connected? What enables me to feel valued? What is my role?

Alongside these small pieces of jigsaw were larger pieces, constructed by another local artist and designer, James from Makers on Abbeydale Road in Sheffield. These were for people to write their responses on to both the questions displayed and the individual values that they had felt drawn to. This was also an opportunity for people to provide any other written feedback.

The written responses were then gathered together and sensitively collated. Everything was treated anonymously, which we felt was an important way to encourage participation. The collated responses were presented as a report to the organisations, giving them real data and a real-time picture of how staff felt connected to the business, to each other and themselves.

The description above offers a brief window into how the project progressed and some of the rationale for it. One of the most interesting elements of this work for the Space to Breathe team was to notice the different ways in which people responded to the project and how their engagement changed over the week. There was a direct correlation between the amount of time spent with staff teams and the level of participation in the project. We discovered that as we engaged with staff face-to-face, actually being present and chatting to them, there was a significant increase in their level of engagement. This in turn allowed genuine conversations to flow and valuable, honest feedback to be given. There was value in sharing the space with staff teams and connecting with them. It was humbling to be part of the life of these organisations for a week. It was a privilege to be allowed into the heart of a community and to build up a level of trust through attention to and an interest in each member of staff as individuals.

¹ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010).

Feedback from businesses taking part has been encouraging in terms of the experience for staff, how thought-provoking it has proved and how it has highlighted well-being at work. This has been an exciting project to be involved in. It has provided opportunities for deep learning for us as a team as well as providing creative spaces for the business teams involved to begin to grow together. It has reinforced our commitment to supporting the creation of a culture of workplace well-being. Encouraging people in the area of well-being is a vital way to support both the spiritual and the mental health of people in the UK.

This connection between spirituality and mental health underpins much of Space to Breathe's work, which has so far included:

- well-being coaching with an emphasis on exploring spirituality
- well-being days
- pop-up workspaces, building community within existing networks of entrepreneurs and solo workers
- creative, well-being support for businesses. These frequently begin with an art installation as a way of initiating well-being conversations
- an arts label called Proost, collaborating with artists looking to explore soulful creativity in their work
- support to festivals, such as Greenbelt and the Edinburgh Festival
- art and reflection days, built around a creative arts focus.

In the introduction to his bestseller *The Road Less Travelled*, Dr M. Scott Peck says, "I make... no distinction between the process of achieving spiritual growth and achieving mental growth. They are one and the same."²

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² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).



ANVIL

BOOK REVIEWS

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 2

VOL 35, ISSUE 2

1. RECOMMENDED READING

Paul Cudby, *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest's Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice* (Alresford: Christian Alternative Books, 2017)

My own first encounter with Paganism was during my time at university. The PaganSoc outnumbered the Christian Union by around three-to-one and I remember an occasion when one of their most dedicated members was asked why he was a Pagan. His response struck a chord and has remained with me since: "When I call on my gods they show up; when I call on your god he doesn't."

In Paul Cudby's book I have found answers to many questions and gentle reproaches for the prejudices I have myself held towards Paganism and those who practise it. The intent of this book was to answer questions that have not been asked often enough by Christians and by doing so move the conversation on to the next stage where Christians can take the beliefs of their Pagan neighbours seriously and seek peace and appreciation, and perhaps learn something from them. He achieves this with great success.

The *Shaken Path* consists of eight chapters, with an introduction and postscript covering: (1) What is Belief and What do Pagans Believe?, (2) Why Are People Drawn to Paganism?, (3) Wicca and Witchcraft, (4) Druidry, (5) Animism and Panpsychism, (6) Shamanism, (7) Heathenism and (8) Becoming What We Were Created to Be and the Role of Forest Church. The style is eminently readable and Cudby has a gift for communicating sometimes complicated ideas very intelligibly, drawing in aspects and stories from his own conversations with Pagans and his own journey in spirituality. I was impressed by his integrity when it came to protecting those whose words he used, aware of the backlash they could face, as well as refusing to avoid difficult subjects, such as the practice of cursing.

This is a book written principally for Christians, offering particular insight into the Pagan (a huge umbrella term) worldview, dispelling many of the myths and explaining oft-misunderstood or mysterious elements of Pagan belief and practice, which have been regarded by Christians with suspicion. The thing that was most notable was Cudby's distinct tone of love for the people about whom he was speaking and respect for their beliefs; challenging and questioning, but not polemically so. He did not give up his faith, attested in his introduction where he adopts the words of Peter in John 6, "You have the words of eternal life". Yet he also demonstrates the humility to see the world through the

eyes of others and be challenged to consider his own underlying assumptions, both cultural and spiritual.

The biggest take away from this book for me (and other Christians) was: how do we do better when meeting Pagans? How do we ask better questions and listen to the answers seriously? A large proportion of the Pagans he met were ex-Christian. Cudby's own challenge to the "knee-jerk" condemnation that many Pagans have experienced from the Christian community is to recover something that is often obscured or underplayed in churches. We all are the "royal priesthood", which since the Reformation has been chiefly (mis-)interpreted to mean that all Christians (usually men) are priests, able to administer every sacrament. What Cudby reminds us, drawing on its original use in the Torah, is that all Christians, lay or ordained, young or old, have a role of mediating the presence of God to the world. As Cudby rightly asserts, we destroy that "priestly-ness" when we fail to love our neighbours, those helpfully defined by Jesus in the parable of the Samaritan as, "everyone, especially those you are prejudiced against".

Cudby also left me re-reading the Bible with new eyes, helpfully drawing on images and stories from Scripture frequently. Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, Paul and others, look very different when our modern spectacles are swapped for something radically different: Elisha enables a guard to see the fiery spirits defending the city. Jesus places his fingers in a deaf man's ears and spits on his finger before placing it on the deaf man's tongue, then speaking the "magic" word "ephatha", "be opened". Peter's shadow healing those whom he walks past. From a Pagan perspective, this is all very normal! This does not mean that we need to start identifying Jesus as a magician or Elisha as a shaman, but it might prompt us to acknowledge a world more crowded and complicated than our implicit materialistic reductionism might unconsciously bias us towards, a world which our ancestors in the faith happily knew and inhabited.

Paganism also offers a connection with nature and with the cycle of the seasons that many in the modern world have lost and experience a yearning for. Urban life, with its flatness and standardisation can sometimes seem to squeeze the divine out. Christianity, being a religion set within liturgical seasons not wholly cut off from the agricultural cycle, could learn much from Paganism about hearing and experiencing God as he moves through his creation, as well as in Word and Sacrament.

I was, however, left uncertain or dissatisfied with some aspects of Cudby's analysis. As I read I noticed a pattern in the interpretation of his experiences with Pagans and how Christians might assess these experiences, which took the following shape: (1) "narrow" and "dogmatic" dualistic Christianity, where it is either God or the Devil, good or evil; (2) the mountain of enlightenment with

many equally valid paths, favoured by the postmodern; and (3) one God, known through different cultural and spiritual lenses. Cudby restrains judgement for the most part, though a tone of exasperation pervades his reference to conservative Christianity. While I would share many of his frustrations, I was not convinced by the implicit preference for option (3). The dismissal of those who would fall under the first category was also somewhat disappointing, particularly as many of those who read their Bible find Paul saying that pagan deities are indeed demons, and that no spirit is to be trusted if does not confess Christ come in the flesh. Cudby's book is an attempt to move past this, to see the bigger picture of how the Creator is working in surprising ways in the lives of Pagans. I welcome the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of Pagans (which I do not doubt), but I am sceptical of the idea that the God of Jesus and Paul is leading Pagans to become more fully Pagan.

Having mentioned these points of discomfort, I want to recommend *The Shaken Path* as essential reading for those who wish to learn more about Paganism from someone who has dedicated much time and love to listening and understanding their beliefs. It also asks penetrating questions about the vitality of Christianity, its urbanity and how to recover the world as created by God and positively bursting with both physical and non-physical life.

Isaac Frisby, CMS

R. Daniel Shaw and William R. Burrows, eds., *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018)

This book is a very welcome contribution to the body of missions literature exploring issues that arise in translation when the gospel is shared from one culture to another. What sounds like a straightforward task has proved to be complex and contested. The book is laid out in a helpful way with two introductory chapters that explore issues of ritual and ceremony, and of the theology and experience of crossing cultures. That is then followed by chapters from a range of authors giving examples of the practice of hybridity from cultures all round the world, which incorporate a significant amount of theological reflection. The book is then concluded with an extended epilogue where the editors highlight pertinent issues and themes from their listening to the various contributions. I read the book from beginning to end, but on reflection I wonder if it might have worked better for me to have read the introductory theoretical chapters at the end.

The challenge and opportunity in mission is a significant one. The challenge is that Western approaches to mission often unwittingly create two problems. One, which the authors draw from the work of Paul Hiebert on, is that they neglect what is often referred to as the excluded middle. This is the realm of social and cultural reality in many cultures where spiritual beings, practices, ancestors and so on are simply part of the fabric of life but seemingly invisible to Western eyes. Traditional ritual and ceremony is usually interacting with this middle in some way. Western missionaries often call people away from their practices rejecting them out of hand. The second related problem the authors suggest is that this creates either a split world and discipleship or an irrelevant Christianity with people continuing in their traditional practices alongside Christianity without missionaries being aware.

Burrows and Shaw propose hybridity as a way of moving forward in this area. When the gospel clothed in one culture meets a new culture inevitably something new, a hybrid, develops that creatively works with the local rituals and draws on the sending culture honouring both the traditional indigenous spirituality and traditional Christian beliefs. Discernment and wisdom is important in this creative process as those in mission seek to participate in what God is already doing in that culture. I welcomed the intention of getting away from the language of dangerous syncretism that can easily be held as the theological bogeyman against those engaging in imaginative practice of inculturation. Yet in reality, as the authors point out, pure Christianity or gospel is simply not available to us anyway. Christianity has always been hybrid, including Western forms!

The case studies are really interesting. I confess I have always loved accounts of imaginative practice in relation to cross cultural mission and especially in the area of inculturation with regard to ritual and worship. Examples range from the Simbu pig kill festival in Papua New Guinea, a death ritual in Japan, to indigenous Igbo worship in Nigeria. The one example I have engaged in personally was a North American smudging ritual which invites the Spirit of God to come and cleanse through inhaling smoke from a smouldering rope of dried sage, which I found fitted well into the beginning of a worship service in Canada. The one area where there are no examples in the book is in Western postmodern contexts where I think issues of connecting with people's rituals and ceremonies is also relevant.

I really commend the book as an important and significant one in conversations about mission and culture. It adds to the growing sense that good contextualisation is becoming more normative and more widely accepted. If anything, I found the book still felt a little defended and some of the practice was a little cautious – or at least the authors felt the need

to defend their practice. I understand this because of the levels of criticism that are ranged against creative practice. But I hope we will get to a place where there is less need to be defended and it becomes more usual to celebrate creative cross cultural practice that develops new examples of hybridity as we seek to join in with where God is at work in the many cultures and communities of the world.

Jonny Baker, CMS

2. BIBLICAL STUDIES

Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. DeBoer, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies focuses entirely on the Gospel and three letters of John; as the editors note in their introduction, to have included the book of Revelation within the scope of their volume would have made it overly complex and too full of caveats to the effect that “of course, the case of *Revelation* is somewhat different”. There are 24 main chapters, each written by a noted expert in the relevant field. I will offer a single-sentence comment on each before making a few general remarks about the handbook as a whole.

H. A. G. Houton examines the text of the Gospel and letters of John, focusing specifically on manuscripts, textual theory and a small selection of textual variants. Michael Labahn discusses literary sources, outlining the history of Johannine source criticism and, while recognising there may well be a literary pre-history to the texts, argues that modern scholarship has tended to focus on the extant documents at the point of departure for academic endeavour. Harold Attridge’s chapter sets out the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics, with a number of useful tables of narrative and other parallels. Martinus deBoer introduces the complex and contested topic of the Johannine community and its literature, giving fair space to a range of perspectives on this debate. Tom Thatcher tackles the equally thorny problem of the relationship between the Beloved Disciple, the fourth evangelist and the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, arguing that the Beloved Disciple’s testimony was foundational to the Fourth Gospel, but that he was not the author.

Urban Von Wahlde outlines the relationship between archaeology and John’s Gospel, taking in both those features of the Gospel that have been confirmed by

archaeological finds, but also noting the areas where scepticism remains. Adele Reinhartz deals with the question of the Jews of the Fourth Gospel, introducing the reader to the ways in which scholars have attempted to explain how John is both so Jewish and yet paradoxically anti-Jewish at the same time. Gitte Buch-Hansen discusses the Greek context, focusing on the relationship with the Greek philosophical tradition as she surveys the major academic debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer tackles the relationship between Johannine literature and contemporary Jewish literature, arguing that the Gospel employs a close reading and detailed use of a range of second temple traditions. Alastair Logan examines the relationship between the Johannine literature and the Gnostics, emphasising the importance of primary sources.

Jo-Ann Brant reads the Fourth Gospel as narrative and drama, explaining how narrative criticism has provided fresh ways of reading the text. Warren Carter examines an alternative approach, that of ideological readings, including ideological criticism of the Gospel as well as postcolonial and political readings. Colleen Conway tackles gender and the Fourth Gospel, discussing language, character and characterisation. Philip Esler turns to social-scientific readings: beginning with the work of Wayne Meeks, he explains the development and trajectory of research to the present day.

Dorothy Lee’s chapter focuses on symbolism and “signs” in the Fourth Gospel, outlining the core Johannine symbols, signs and the relationship between symbolism and theology. Jörg Frey discusses dualism and the world in the Johannine corpus, defining terms, outlining scholarly debate and the nature and function of dualistic language in Johannine texts. Ruben Zimmermann examines eschatology and time in the Fourth Gospel, outlining key motifs, theological and narrative impact. Udo Schnelle explains the person of Jesus in John’s Gospel, written to engender faith in Jesus, working at three levels: narrative, conceptual density of Christological titles and theological themes. Jean Zumstein deals with the related topic of the purpose of the ministry and death of Jesus in John, describing the Gospel as an act of post-Easter memory. Catrin Williams discusses how faith, eternal life and the Spirit are described and relate to the plot, symbolism, character and character development in John.

Jan Van Der Watt explains the ethical material in the Gospel and Letters, arguing there is plenty of material, and that the focus must be both on what is expected and also why these actions are commended. Bruce Schuchard discusses scholarly interest in temple, festivals and Scripture in the Gospel from both theological and literary perspectives. Judith Lieu explains the relationship between the Johannine literature and the wider canon of Scripture. In the

final chapter, William Lamb examines Johannine commentaries in the early church, including contested and heretical interpretations.

The chapters are generally accessibly written; each ends with a few items of suggested reading and an (often very extensive) bibliography. Students looking for pointers for essays will find this handbook invaluable; as such it is a must-buy for any decent theological library. My only disappointment is the lack of specific attention given to the Johannine letters. The rationale for not having a specific essay is probably that attention is given at appropriate points within the different thematic presentations. However, constraints on space may have precluded otherwise useful contributions on the letters, and in my view at least one stand-alone essay would have compensated for this, but this is a relatively minor point. There is much solid scholarship here; this is a volume that deserves to be consulted frequently by students over the next decade.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

Adele Reinhartz, ed., *The Gospel of John and Jewish-Christian Relations* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018)

This book is a must-read for scholars of the Fourth Gospel, and anyone who wishes to take seriously accusations of Christian anti-Judaism. In the introduction, Reinhartz explains that the book is the product of papers given at a conference on the Gospel of John and Jewish-Christian relations, as a means of continuing the dialogue between Christians and Jews on this complicated topic as well as explaining the context of the dialogue, in particular the negative statements about “the Jews” that run right through John’s Gospel. The book as a whole is divided into three parts: reading John, preaching John, and re-presenting John.

Part one consists of two chapters. First, PHEME PERKINS argues that it is possible to distinguish compositional layers within the Fourth Gospel and that the earlier chapters and crucifixion, with their invective against the *Ioudaioi*, constitute an earlier layer, while the farewell discourse (and the Johannine epistles) are part of a later strata. The farewell discourse makes virtually no mention of the Jews; rather, the negative pole of the Gospel’s binary is now “the world”, reflecting a situation in which the Johannine community has little or no contact with Judaism but is heading towards a gnostic dualistic path of prioritising the spiritual and repudiating the material. The censure of “the Jews” no longer has any force. Second, MICHAEL AZAR offers an overview of “some of the ways that John’s Gospel has impacted Jewish-Christian relations in the Orthodox

East” (p.21). Azar is not arguing that Orthodox Christian history is entirely pro-Jewish; he recognises that there were moments of persecution, but he does make three points. First, that early interpreters of John did not speak of Jews as being by nature of the devil, nor did they blame all Jews for what they regarded as the actions of a few leaders. Second, that Orthodox art did not resort to the negative portrayal of the Jews so often found in Western tradition. Third, that Eastern Paschal texts reveal the influence of both the Fourth Gospel and also “a deeply Eastern, Hellenistic-Hebraic form of belief in the Messiah” (p.39).

Part two contains three chapters. ALAN CULPEPPER tackles *Preaching the Hostile References to “the Jews” in the Gospel of John*, focusing specifically on the revised common lectionary. While he notes that many of the more problematic texts (notably in John 7–8) do not feature in the lectionary, the readings for Holy Week do present a challenge for preachers. His suggestion, built on the proposals of others, is that the preacher must acknowledge the problem, set the texts in their historical context, reinterpret the texts and then condemn the text on moral grounds. The preacher must pay careful attention to language to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and be honest about the theological and moral dilemmas the text poses. EILEEN SCHULLER covers similar ground from a Catholic perspective, arguing it is difficult for “Sunday Catholics” to “get any real sense of the great themes and particular theological approach of John’s Gospel” (p.76). She notes that just over half the Gospel text is included, and that the most controversial passages such as chapters seven and eight are omitted (except for the story of the woman caught in adultery). This has the effect that Sunday Catholics are unaware that there are problematic passages in the Fourth Gospel, and so cannot see why the text poses a problem for Jewish-Christian relations.

Finally in part two, AMY-JILL LEVINE offers a Jewish perspective. Levine begins by noting that while scholars may recognise the problem of anti-Judaism within the Fourth Gospel, this rarely makes it into churches. She recognises that there are many reasons for this, but suggests one of her own: the “coupled phenomena of Christian privilege and Christian fragility” (p.87). By this she means that Christians, who are in a privileged position of power, do not realise their own prejudices and are not able to address them if they do, or as she puts it later “ignorance coupled with denial” (p.92). Levine supports her proposal with a detailed critique of Christian practices in preaching and teaching the Fourth Gospel as well as offering suggestions for how this systematic, structural problem can be addressed. She proposes four options: that anti-Jewish texts be removed from use in Church, that clergy be trained in addressing the problem within the context of their preaching and teaching, to challenge the preacher

when you hear anti-Jewish rhetoric and, finally, to always imagine a Jewish person is listening to your preaching.

Part three also has three chapters. In her striking contribution, Marcia Kupfer expounds how the rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel, especially of the Jews as children of the devil, served as the basis for the illustrations used in medieval Bibles. She concentrates on the twin figures of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* (Church and Synagogue), explaining how the former was normally portrayed as triumphing over and defeating the latter, something Kupfer takes as illustrative of the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament. Michael Marissen argues that two Bach Church Cantatas (those for the First Sunday after Easter and the Sunday after Ascension) build on the negative rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel to the persecution of the Church, the mystical body of Christ, by both actual and metaphorical Jews. He argues that in “Cantata 42, Jews are the persecuting enemies of the disciples of Jesus, and ‘the Jews’ of the Gospel of John are emblematic of the true church’s persecutors ever since” (p.154). Cantata 44 focuses on the time when followers of Jesus were put out of the synagogue. For Lutheran Christians this was a paradigm for any persecution of the true church by actual or metaphorical Jews (the later principally meaning the Roman church). Finally, Richard Walsh discusses Johannine Jesus films and Christian supersessionism. He lists numerous examples arguing that the Johannine vision dominates Jesus films, using four structured motifs, namely the stranger from afar, the light of the world, the darkness comprehended it not and the victorious Passion. This also means, he argues, that these films are home to Christian supersessionism and so, implicitly at least, anti-Judaism, especially through portrayals of Jesus that completely expropriate him from his Jewish context.

The Gospel of John and Jewish-Christian Relations is well worth reading. Personally I found Culpepper’s and Levine’s chapters the most useful; while I did not agree with everything either of them said, they offered the most relevant challenge to a Protestant minister wishing to preach the Fourth Gospel with integrity in twenty-first century Britain. Many preachers will not bother to think through the issues raised by this book, and their sermons (and so their listeners) will be the poorer for that deficit. For those who have the courage to read and take up the challenge of this book, the result will be very rewarding.

Tom Wilson, St Philip’s Centre, Leicester

Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016)

Reading Sacred Scripture encompasses 12 major Christian teachers of the church through nearly two millennia of biblical interpretation. The bulk of the research and content in the book is by Stephen Westerholm, who only intended to write on ten major biblical interpreters. He was challenged to include Barth and hence recruited Martin, who was studying Barth at that time. This is a combined effort of father and son, with the son Martin addressing Schleiermacher and Barth.

Without doubt this is a prodigious work that has involved much diligence and erudition as well as careful selection of quoted texts. There are two introductory chapters, “The Voice of Scripture” and “Before the Christian Bible”, which, of themselves, are worth careful study. The authors argue that the reading (or hearing) of the Bible seeks to evoke faith and therefore it should not be read like any other book: “The focus of this present study, however, is on how the Christian Bible has been read and understood by influential interpreters sympathetic to its implicit claim to represent and to convey the word of God.” The second chapter, “Before the Christian Bible”, looks at the making and acceptance of the essential core of the New Testament and also how the Old Testament Scriptures were used and interpreted in the first two centuries.

The rest of the book goes on to deal with a significant figure in church history chapter by chapter, covering Irenaeus, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, the Pietists and Wesley, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Barth and Bonhoeffer. I particularly appreciated the chapters on Origen and Schleiermacher, which presented an excellent assessment of their contribution to biblical interpretation. There is a final chapter, “Beyond the Sacred Page”, which is an extremely helpful summary of the wide range of material referred to in the text. I would have preferred more information on some of these figures in terms of both their historical context and their disposition and character, as I thought at times the description was a bit abstract. If you have a reasonable grasp of church history though, it should help you to get more out of the book.

This is a challenging read cover to cover, but one that yields its fruit through perseverance. It is a book though that some may wish to dip into when studying different church figures. Those interested in historical biblical

interpretation with its diverse methodologies will find that this is a book for them. As the epistemological debates consider the nature of historical truth and biblical interpretation, as well as various claims to biblical orthodoxy, this book is a helpful reminder that within the worlds of these twelve male interpreters there was a breadth of hermeneutical approaches and assumptions. How these great scholars dealt with difficult passages, variant manuscripts and conflicting texts is illuminating. While many of those considered were pre-enlightenment biblical criticism, there is no doubt that they were aware of many of the issues raised in biblical interpretation. All of these interpreters may have adopted different interpretative tools, but they also recognised the need for faith and God's Spirit to reveal God's word to them.

This is a book which I will now enjoy dipping into and one from which I can find many useful quotes!

Paul Thaxter, CMS

3. DOCTRINE AND PHILOSOPHY

Wayne Glausser, *Something Old, Something New: Contemporary Entanglements of Religion and Secularity* (New York: OUP, 2018)

Glausser is professor of English at DePauw University. Raised a Catholic and switching to atheism in his teenage years, he now finds elements in both by which he is either attracted or repelled. In *Something Old, Something New*, the author explores "entanglement" as a theory to describe contemporary relationships between religion and secularity. The author's voice is strong through the chapters of the book and his research has been meticulous. In the preface the reader discovers that Glausser was diagnosed with an incurable metastatic cancer during the drafting of the final chapter and before the book's final editing. This revelation sits with the reader throughout; the text's interplay between secularity and religion now hinting at a journey that is more personal than theoretical, while remaining grounded in research and analysis.

Chapter one introduces the concept of entanglement, setting it apart from views of non-entanglement. Non-entanglement stances include the view that religious and secular worlds should not or do not interact with one another and the, often much relied upon, view that religion and, for example, science, approach the same subject with different questions and different approaches so remain distinct. Society is in a new era, Glausser argues, where the secular and the religious

are utterly caught up and we need to develop a new language to analyse and critique the voices of the age.

Chapters two and three explore two contemporary phenomena of secularity and religion; that of the New Atheist and the Faithful Scientist. As an English professor, Glausser explores how the people in these positions argue their case. Chapter two's exploration of the rhetorical devices of New Atheists gave a new lens through which to explore the arguments of Dawkins, Hitchens and the like. Chapter three's analysis of the reliability of the claim of faithful scientists that there can be a "unity of knowledge" is equally challenging.

Chapter four explores the descriptive and, at times, interpretative approaches taken by the Norton Anthology over the years, into texts that by nature of their context include an intertwining of the religious. It is a thorough analysis, but one does not need to be an academic within English literature to grasp the point. The anthology has had to evolve over its lifetime to adapt to the decreasing religious knowledge of readers and a global, more accepting and inclusive approach to viewpoints other than those from a Judeo-Christian perspective.

In chapter five, Pope Francis's secular friendly modernity is explored, alongside his deep respect for iconography, and the local mystical and reverential practices of congregations. The author sees this as "two sides" to Francis, but I would argue, from a perspective of Jesuit spirituality, that they are two sides of the same coin. Regardless of my disappointment of the lack of examination of spirituality, the exploration of the entanglement of what the author terms "Francis the New" with "Francis the Old" demonstrates the increasing complexity in finding divisions between secularity and religion.

Chapter six is a fascinating analysis of Aquinas's seven deadly sins and their exploration within the journal, *Scientific American*. It is a wonderful example of the intimate relationship between religious ideas and scientific exploration and neither is ultimately displaced in the rich dialogue that ensues.

Chapter seven, perhaps the most poignant given the author's personal circumstances, compares, contrasts and finds deep entanglement in the practices of extreme unction (the Catholic practice of prayers and anointing given near to the end of someone's life) and psychedelic last rites, where the priest is substituted by psychotherapeutic practice and the oil with LSD.

This is a book grown from careful research and analysis, carefully presented and discussed, and I was deeply impressed by the integrity and intelligence of the voice throughout. Glausser speaks out of an American context, where a particular brand of evangelicalism can dominate public discourse, and his religious

background is Catholic. In addition, he approaches arguments from his own academic discipline, quite different to the tools of practical theology. This may mean a degree of translation is required for the average UK reader of faith but I found the work to do so well worth undertaking.

Revd Kate Pearson, University of Warwick

Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015)

According to the “dreaded Four Horsemen” of atheism (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens), those of us who are Christians (not to mention the adherents of many other faiths) have succumbed to dangerous levels of irrationality.

Templeton Prize-winning philosopher Alvin Plantinga fervently disagrees. *Knowledge and Christian Belief* is his rebuttal. Or, to be more precise, it is the latest instantiation of his rebuttal, derivative of his prior (and thicker) volume, *Warranted Christian Belief* (OUP, 2000). Like its precursor, this pared-back treatise is well-structured, erudite and compelling. No space is wasted in its mere 126 pages, which, while clearly written, demand concentration.

The major objective of this book is to show that belief can be *justified* or *warranted*. This is a separate question from whether or not religious beliefs are true, as Plantinga makes clear at various intervals. Questions of “truth” are not the concern of this undertaking, inasmuch as it is impossible to render a verdict on such matters.

Although many interesting arguments populate this slender volume, several are especially central to Plantinga’s major objective and deserve attention. First, in chapter one, he unsettles the claim – advanced by Kant and, more recently, Gordon Kaufman – that humans are unable to possess knowledge about God because God is not part of the world of appearances (i.e. not available to sensory experience). For Plantinga, this is a faulty axiom, even if it seems epistemologically humble: there’s no good reason, he notes, to “think we can’t have *a priori* knowledge of what is real” (p.6). Along these lines, the idea that God’s lack of availability to our senses means that we cannot know anything about him is up for debate. Perhaps humans are endowed with a capacity to know about God that is unrelated to sensory experience.

Having established the possibility of knowledge about God, Plantinga then turns to argue that such

knowledge should not be seen as inescapably irrational. Here, the book’s central thesis comes into focus, developed in chapters two to six. In making his case, Plantinga uses Marx and Freud as a foil, both of whom criticised the rationality/justifiability of religious belief (the “F&M Complaint”). For Marx, religious faith is irrational because results from a “perverted world-consciousness” – that is, some sort of *cognitive malfunction* (p.29). For Freud, religion is irrational because it is not really concerned with the truth but instead with enabling humans to cope with a “cold, bleak, [and] miserable world” (p.25).

Despite having gained much traction, Plantinga finds the “F&M Complaint” overly declarative and insufficiently demonstrative. As such, in countering its allegations, he begins by producing a standard for the rationality (or warrant) of religious belief. His list is succinct and cogent: warranted religious belief, says Plantinga, must 1) derive from properly functioning cognitive faculties; 2) be formed in an appropriate epistemic environment; 3) be generated by faculties that are aimed a true belief (as opposed to seeking comfort or some other such end); and 4) emerge from faculties that are *successfully* aimed at true belief (as opposed to pursuing true beliefs according to a flawed plan).

With this criteria in hand, Plantinga turns (chapter three) to demonstrate that theistic belief can in fact be rational. Here, he appeals to the legacy of Aquinas and Calvin (the “A/C Model”) as a means to explain the presence of general belief in God. Both thinkers suggest that humans possess a faculty that attunes them to divinity (the *sensus divinitatis*, to echo Calvin), the upshot of which is that belief in God can be classified as “basic” (i.e. “innate” rather than “chosen” through ratiocination). In such a scenario, theistic belief would not be unwarranted *de jure*, given that there is nothing in this equation that automatically violates the standard for warrant. Those who would disagree, argues Plantinga, are simply showing their subjection to an atheistic bias (p.43).

In chapter four, Plantinga extends the “A/C Model” to cover the core doctrines of the Christian faith (e.g. Trinity, Creation, Fall, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Regeneration, Eternal Life, etc). In this case, however, he attributes the presence of such beliefs not to a faculty within humans (e.g. the *sensus divinitatis*) but rather to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS). Surely in this a scenario belief is unavoidably irrational? Not so, points out Plantinga – for again there is nothing within this model that in principle violates his four-fold criteria for warrant.

On the coat-tails of these discussions – and in anticipation of likely questions – Plantinga turns to reflect more deeply on the nature of faith (chapter five)

as well as the work of the Spirit (chapter six). While the constraints of this review preclude treatment of these two discussions, they are among the most gripping in the book, wherein Plantinga reveals that his philosophical skills are accompanied by theological acumen (this is also the case in chapter four, in his discussion of sin).

The final four chapters identify and engage with “defeaters”, namely potential reasons for rejecting Plantinga’s argument that Christian belief can be warranted. Among other topics, these pages grapple with the role of experience in belief, the relationship of the Bible to faith in an age of historical criticism and the so-called problem of evil.

The virtues of this book are many. At the top of a list is its overall success (at least in the eyes of this reader) in making an accessible and persuasive case for the possibility that religious beliefs can be rational and highly warranted. Without wanting to be churlish, a few minor (perceived) foibles are worth mentioning. First, several sections (for example, the discussion of “basicality” on pp.37ff) might benefit from a bit of refining so as to enhance the text’s intelligibility for a non-specialist audience. Second – and this misgiving reflects my training as a theologian – on p.59 Plantinga makes a puzzling statement: faith, he asserts, is more a matter of *believing* than *doing* something. I am not sure how such a comment stands up to biblical scrutiny. On this point, James (the brother of the Lord) might beg differ. I suspect Jesus would too, given that he called Peter to show faith by *stepping* onto the water.

Revd Roger L. Revell, Selwyn College, Cambridge

Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017)

The essence of Schmidt-Leukel’s argument is that pluralism means that some, but not necessarily all, religions are equally valid paths to salvation. This recent exposition of his views is a book that is based on two series of lectures he gave. He explains that his understanding of pluralism is not relativism, as he recognises there are valid criteria by which one can determine if a religion has a greater revelation of truth than others. He is also clear that pluralism is not toleration, as tolerance presumes a negative assessment of that which is tolerated; and moreover there are many things that should not be tolerated. He is also clear that pluralism is specific, arguing that one does not hold a general theory of pluralism, but rather is a Christian pluralist or a Buddhist pluralist or a Sikh pluralist and so forth.

The particular nature of pluralism is then demonstrated through a discussion of its Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese religious forms. For Christians, the questions revolve around how to understand the nature of God’s love, of saving faith and divine revelation. For Jewish pluralists, the point of departure is the so-called “Noahide Laws”, that is, the commands God gave to Noah, which are taken as applying to all humanity. The more complex question concerns what it means for the Jews to be God’s chosen people, with the response being variations on a theme of understanding God at work in different ways for different peoples. Within Islam, the primary justification for pluralism is Surah 2:62. A second verse, 5:69, which was revealed towards the end of Mohammad’s life, is taken as further confirmation of the case. Sufi mysticism is also used to strengthen the Islamic case for pluralism.

Schmidt-Leukel argues that Hinduism has exhibited both pluralist and anti-pluralist tendencies in its history. The latter is particularly seen in the contemporary Hindutva movement, which has an exclusivist understanding of Hinduism. The pluralist impulse in Hinduism is most readily affirmed when *sanatana dharma* (eternal truth) is recognised as holding true for more than one specific historical or linguistic articulation of truth. Regarding Buddhism, Schmidt-Leukel explains that Buddhism does tend to emphasise holding lightly to its teachings, but nevertheless that those teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path are necessary to attain enlightenment, and thus a tendency towards an exclusivist understanding. But there are pluralist impulses within Buddhism. For Theravada Buddhism, Schmidt-Leukel identifies teachings of the existence of multiple enlightened beings, and multiple, incomplete, religious truths. For Mahayana Buddhism, there are also the teachings of the existence of both relative and absolute truth; and the doctrine of different religious ends for different religious actions, although Schmidt-Leukel regards this as more inclusivist than pluralist.

Finally, within Daoist understandings, all human beings are to live in accordance with *qi*, “the vital energy as which the unfathomable *Dao* is manifest in life” (p.94). All religions can, therefore, be seen as useful or harmful depending on how they relate to this aspiration. Confucianism, like Daoism, values harmony, and so where religion leads to a healthy “middle way” it is viewed positively, but where it leads to extremes, it is understood negatively.

Schmidt-Leukel is clear that religious pluralism is not a theory above religions, but a way of interpreting their diversity and encouraging interaction between them. He argues on this basis in favour of interreligious theology, by which he means reflection “on the major themes of human life by drawing on the insights from

more than one religious tradition” (p.113). For Schmidt-Leukel there are four key principles of interreligious theology. First, a theological credit of trust, which put in Christian terms is “the assumption that revelation in the sense of divine self-communication is not limited to the people of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (p.131). Second, the unity of reality, believing that all truth wherever and however it is discerned is compatible and coherent. Third, that interreligious theology is tied to interreligious discourse, not a project of isolated individuals, but one of collaboration and team working. Fourth, it is an open process, never complete, always changing and developing.

Schmidt-Leukel then puts his theory of interreligious theology to practical use in five chapters. The Prophet and the Son presents a case for a sympathetic Christian reading of Muhammad. The Son and the Buddha focuses on those who try to walk a Buddhist and a Christian path simultaneously. The chapter on the Buddha and the Prophet is more adventurous, discussing Muslim views of Buddhism and Buddhist views of Islam, noting that historically Muslims were more engaged in this comparative exercise than Buddhists, as well as more recent disagreements and attempts at reconciliation. Schmidt-Leukel’s attempt to develop an interreligious theology of creation draws on Christian, Muslim and Buddhist teachings. Working against the grain of the disagreements that exist between these faiths Schmidt-Leukel develops a theory that arguably leans more on a Buddhist rejection of the existence of a creator than on a genuine synthesis of the three faiths’ mutually incompatible views. Finally, Schmidt-Leukel explores a “fractal interpretation of religious diversity,” which he argues operates on three levels: inter-religious differences are also present at an intra-religious level between co-religionists and finally at an intra-subjective level with an individual’s mind. His case is that this fractal understanding of religions paves the way for the further development of interreligious theology.

Schmidt-Leukel makes an intellectual and academic case for a pluralist understanding and a pluralist methodology of academic enquiry, which may appear far removed from the everyday interaction of peoples of different faiths. But the underlying pluralist principles could be applied to any sphere of life and integrated into any way of working. As a committed evangelical with a very different understanding of the salvation of those of other faiths, I nevertheless found this book a stimulating read. Schmidt-Leukel is an accomplished scholar and a fine writer, and while you may well find yourself disagreeing with his conclusions, this is a book that will make you think.

Tom Wilson, St Philip’s Centre, Leicester

4. ETHICS AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

Peter Tyler, *Christian Mindfulness: Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2018)

I was looking forward to reading this book and was not disappointed. Peter Tyler is the professor of pastoral theology and spirituality at St Mary’s University, Twickenham, London, and his depth of understanding and his ability to communicate well without devaluing substance is admirable. This is no pop-psycho-spiritual appropriation of the current interest in mindfulness, but a relevant reflection on the nature of mindfulness and how it relates to the Christian tradition and the ways in which it can enable openness to and appreciation of interfaith dialogue.

Tyler brings you on to safe, Christ-centred, ground while at the same time reminding you that the path is not level or linear and there is much to learn and be open to within different traditions. The book of 177 pages has six chapters – each of value in themselves as rich mini-studies. They cover Mindfulness or Heartfulness? (chapter one), the Mindful Psychology of the Desert (chapter two), the Iberian School of Mindfulness and Mental Prayer (chapter three), The Mindful Way – St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross (chapter four), Thomas Merton – Mindful Clarity of the Heart (chapter five), and Living a Mindful Life – the Indian Tradition (chapter six). The book is coherent, cogent, well-structured and thought through. The practical mindfulness/heartfulness exercises at the end of each chapter enable the reader to begin to engage in practice. Participating in the lessons of this book does feel like going on a personal course with Professor Tyler, reaping the benefits of his academic erudition and personal example.

In chapter one he considers “Mindfulness or Heartfulness?” He draws on his relationship with Buddhism, which began from his early training for the Catholic priesthood. He also has been fully aware of the development of the varied mindfulness approaches developed in the western hemisphere. Jesus remains his highest guru but that does not need to discount the respect he holds for the teaching of the “Lord Buddha who offers extraordinary insights into the human condition” (p.7). He argues helpfully that the term “heartfulness” rather than the more cognitive mindfulness is more descriptive of the Christian tradition (and possibly some eastern interpretations in Buddhism and Hinduism), which involves a form of active contemplation – an applied approach to this discipline, but one that is careful to avoid a debased

utilitarian approach. This was a key insight that travelled throughout the book exploring the nature of Christian heartfulness.

In “The Mindful Psychology of the Desert” he draws out some of the early roots of a desert spirituality that have influenced this discipline. In chapters three and four he talks of an Iberian School of Mindfulness and the practice of “oracion mental”, as practised by St Teresa of Avila and others. He asserts that this could be understood as a forerunner to what today people call mindfulness. His chapter on Thomas Merton helped me understand better how to appreciate his life and work. Tyler’s engagement with eastern tradition is not one of simply choosing a few superficial attractions, but of seeking to understand the spiritual practice of dedicated adherents.

This book is full of apt quotes, wisdom and a good bibliography. For those who are serious about the study and practice of Christian mindfulness, or for those who are just interested in getting to know and appreciate the tradition, then I fully recommend this accessible academic contribution. I liked its openness to God and to others, but without losing its distinctively Christian essence. In Tyler’s own words as he concluded: “We can call Christianity a religion of ‘mindful activity’. Christians may adopt the method of mindfulness, but always there must be a ‘contemplation in action’ centred on love for the Guru Jesus – crucified and resurrected. In the world we shall have, so we are told, much tribulation. Teresa compared life to a ‘night in a bad inn’. Yet by practising the way of Christian mindfulness as I have outlined in this book, we can have a glimpse of the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price” (p.153).

Paul Thaxter, CMS

Francis Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism: Deliverance and Demonology in Church Ritual* (London: IB Tauris, 2018)

My initiation into the mysteries of Anglican exorcism was mundane. As a 12-year-old, I accompanied my father to the home of a family where ghosts had been seen and caused distress. It was a routine introduction to the cleansing of place, a matter-of-fact ministry that was taken for granted in his old-fashioned Anglo-Catholic way, and which I continued into my own ministry in the Caribbean.

While training in West Yorkshire in the early 1970s, I had been profoundly influenced by the burgeoning charismatic movement, with its talk of “deliverance ministry” and of people “possessed by spirits”. Like many, I read the 1972 Bishop of Exeter’s Report and

was shocked by the 1974 Ossett case, and in the early 1980s I began a ministry in north Devon. Here for the first time there was a demand for a ministry to some deeply troubled people, and the diocese directed me to the Church of England’s training programme. My only regret is that I took so long to get there.

Francis Young’s book has resurfaced these memories, and I am grateful that he has researched this little bit of “the history of me” with such detailed care. He comes to the subject with impeccable credentials, having previously written *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* in 2016, oddly included in Macmillan’s Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic. Just as importantly for me, he is a Christian, and understands the church from the inside out. This is not to suggest a faith bias: he is far too good an academic for that.

The six chapters take us from “the reformation of exorcism” through to the twenty-first century. The early narrative rightly hooks the beginning of the story into the theological and liturgical transformation of baptism from 1549 onwards. The first chapter’s discussion of causes célèbres and the predictable ambivalence and resistance of the authorities introduce us to the recurring themes of scepticism, spiritual control and popular fascination that have dogged us ever since.

Subsequent chapters set the discourse within the framework of Canon 72 of 1604, the rise of spiritualism in England from 1852 onwards, the re-emergence of a formal healing ministry (Keswick, Anglican Pentecostalism, parts of the Anglo-Catholic Revival) and the publication of the Exeter Report. Particular attention is paid to the ministry of Gilbert Shaw (1886–1967) whom Young calls “the father of [Anglican] exorcism”, and to his disciple Max Petitpierre. “It is clear that virtually all practice of exorcism in the modern Church of England can be traced back to Shaw” (p.140).

The final chapter is a helpful and balanced insight into the ongoing theological issues and battles, and a good starting point for those coming fresh to the subject. Though the question of exorcism has been overshadowed in recent years by the rise of other more strident controversies, Young concludes that “it is unlikely that the Church of England, fearful of losing its privileged place in the life of the nation, will withdraw from the market for exorcism any time soon” (p.197).

It’s not a jolly read, and I noticed with amusement that one of the two Amazon reviews suggested Phil Rickman’s *Merrily Watkins* novels as a more entertaining introduction to the subject. He misses the point. This is an academic study of a subject that is much too important to be left to the fertile imagination of a sub-genre of horror fiction.

Adrian Chatfield, Ilkeston

5. MISSION

Douglas Pratt, *Religion and Extremism: Rejecting Diversity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

This is an interesting and thought-provoking book engaging with a contested and controversial topic that impacts society, namely the relationship between religious faith and extremist activity. One of the big challenges of responding to extremism is definitional: what is extremist, what is terrorist, what is a threat, what is troubling but not criminal. The questions are many and coherent, thought through, empirically supported answers few and far between. Pratt does a decent job of engaging with these questions, and while I did not agree with all his arguments, they are cogent, accessible and articulate. Pratt's focus is on Abrahamic faiths and his intention is to move beyond simplistic and trite statements to more detailed and sophisticated analysis of the issue in question. His observation that, "Religion presents opportunities for the inculcation of extremism and violence, and also provides checks and boundaries" (p.4) is useful, and a welcome one in a field that sadly often presents only over-simplifications of complex phenomena. Likewise, his description of postmodernism as "an intellectual vector, a direction of reflective expression and critical appreciation, rather than a developed theoretical construct" (p.17) is one I shall quote elsewhere.

The broad shape of *Religion and Extremism* is first a discussion of welcoming and resistant responses to diversity; second, exposition of Abrahamic "texts of terror"; third, exploration of Jewish, Christian and Islamic extremism; fourth, two case studies of what Pratt terms "reactive co-radicalisation"; and fifth, analysis of the relationship between extremism and Islamophobia.

Pratt divides welcoming responses to diversity between pluralist and inclusivist paradigms. He proposes five sub-sets of pluralism and four for inclusivism. He draws almost exclusively on scholars who at least begin from a Christian perspective, even if some, such as John Hick, are not necessarily comfortable identifying themselves primarily in Christian terms. The most striking part of this discussion for me was Pratt's notion of some evangelicals as "gatekeeper inclusivists" (p.26), by which he means those who engage positively with those of other faiths, while believing that ultimately salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus.

I found the discussion of those who resist diversity to be less persuasive. Pratt's exploration of the origins of Christian fundamentalism is sound and his exposition of twenty features of fundamentalism good scholarship.

However, his contention that exclusivists cannot co-exist with those of other faiths was an assertion rather than an argument supported by evidence (p.33), as was his claim that exclusivism is now "clearly dated" (p.34). His presumption that a literalist reading of Scripture must be naïve was also more assertion than argument. There was no discussion, for example, of the difference between salvific and epistemological exclusivism, nor the reality that those who espouse pluralism can be as intolerant of dissent and difference as an exclusivist.

The discussion of texts of terror was interesting, but I was surprised that Pratt did not engage much with exegetical attempts to derive positive, spiritual meanings from the texts, focusing instead primarily on listing the more problematic texts and offering brief analyses of them. The chapter on Jewish extremism focused inevitably primarily on the Israel–Palestine conflict. Pratt makes the helpful observation that many Jews who engage in violence are at the same time on a journey towards taking their religion more seriously. This is not an argument that religiosity leads to violence; rather that a small minority who become more religious end up doing so in a way that manifests itself in violence. There is an interesting discussion of the Phineas model of zealotry, of violence within Zionism as well as attempts to counter violence.

The discussion of Christian extremism contained relatively little examination of the treatment of Jewish people over the centuries, an unfortunate omission. The examples of modern Christian extremists, especially the Christian Identity movement, the Church of Jesus Christ Christian/Aryan Nation, and the Phineas Priesthood are sobering reading, reminding us that Christians cannot glibly argue their faith no longer produces extremists. Likewise the exploration of the theological rationale of apartheid is an apt reminder.

Pratt sets out what he terms the trajectories of Islamic extremism, explaining its origin and intellectual development, as well as the growth of Islamist inspired terrorism. Some of the analysis is weak; the discussion of *jihad* for example did not explore how this contested term is defined, and I question how many Muslims see the world in terms of *dar al Islam* (the House of Islam). But Pratt is right that using fundamentalism, a term defined in primarily Christian terms, to analyse Islam is problematic to say the least.

The chapter on mutual extremism, which Pratt terms reactive co-radicalisation, contained two slightly surprising case studies: the Swiss minaret ban and the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik. I think Pratt's point in using the former example is that there are hardly any mosques in Switzerland that have minarets, and so the ban is, he argues, an example of how a small extremist political group hijacked the national political agenda to further their own hatred. This may well be

true, but there are more powerful examples of reactive co-radicalisation, the example of various far-right organisations in the UK (such as Britain First or National Action) in debate with Islamist groups such as al-Muhajiroun being a case in point. I was also not entirely convinced by Pratt's argument that Islamophobia is a form of religious extremism. He does at least recognise the term is a contested one, and offer a fairly general definition ("a generalised and inchoate fear of Muslims" p.134). Pratt is right that media reporting fuels prejudice against Muslims, that there are large sectors of society whose wilful ignorance of Islam perpetuates their dislike of Muslims. But he does not unpack how this interfaces with the reality of Islamist inspired terror attacks; the analysis he offers is too broad brush to be really effective.

Overall *Religion and Extremism* is a well-written, cogently argued and accessible introduction to the topic. It covers the main ground competently and provides stimulus for further thought and reflection. Evangelical Christians will benefit from engaging with this text, even if they do not necessarily agree with the arguments put forward.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

Andrew C. Thompson, *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Vol II: The Long Eighteenth Century, c.1689 – c.1828* (Oxford: OUP, 2018)

In a recent edition of the *History Hit* podcast, Stephen Fry opined, and Dan Snow agreed, that the roots of the contemporary world can primarily be found in the "long" eighteenth century. As I was just starting to read this volume covering the same period of history, I began to wonder just how much that assertion applied to the Protestant dissenting traditions. Certainly, the 1689 Toleration Act gave dissenters an official (though subordinate) status, but just how fundamental was this period to their later development? I read on with interest.

With individual chapters written by a team of specialist historians, the format lends itself to specific sectioning rather than to a continuous flow. The first section has five chapters on the dissenting traditions within England, the second has a further five chapters on those traditions outside England, from Wales to the American colonies.

A third section – "Awakening" – examines dissenting response to the Evangelical revival and to the establishment of missionary societies. A fourth –

"Context" – examines the evolving status of the dissenting traditions in Britain following the 1689 Toleration Act and then examines the role of dissenters in the movement to abolish slavery. The final section – "Congregations and Living" – is to this reviewer the most satisfying. Putting aside denominational differences, it takes a broad overview of themes such as theology, sermons, hymnody, education and architecture.

Notwithstanding an enjoyable and informative read, I find myself with three main thoughts about this volume. First, though there were clear links between the Evangelical revival on both sides of the Atlantic (for example, in the persons of Whitefield and the Wesleys), is covering such a geographically wide range of churches in a single volume going to be too superficial to be of real value? Second, and following on from this, is the confusing use of the term "dissent" in jurisdictions where there was no state church from which to dissent. Third, the anomaly of Anglicans and Presbyterians changing status from establishment to dissent every time they crossed the English/Scottish border (in either direction).

The *terminus ad quem* of this volume is 1828, the date of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. The removal of this legal restriction sees the end of "dissent" *per se* and its rapid evolution into the resurgent "nonconformity" that flourished in the religious marketplace of Victorian England. The roots of this nineteenth-century flourishing were clearly there in the eighteenth, but there is no hint as to why the edifice was to crumble so spectacularly in the twentieth century. Future volumes in the series will no doubt address this spectacular change in dissenting fortunes.

John Darch, Ellesmere

Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being With the Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2017)

Justin Welby describes Sam Wells as "one of the finest priest-theologians of our time" who "weaves together deep theology with the practical heart and skill of a pastor". This is an apt description of both the author and the book. *Incarnational Ministry* is one of a pair of works (alongside *Incarnational Mission*) that are a culmination of Wells's previous work, especially that in *Living Without Enemies* and *A Nazareth Manifesto*. In these previous works, Wells argues that the Christian faith is primarily about "being with" rather than "working for, working with, or being for". Wells describes eight dimensions of what this involves: presence – actually showing up; attention –

slowing down to see the particularity of a person or situation without fantasy; mystery – distinguishing between a problem that can be solved and the unique inexplicability of *this* person and *this* situation; delight – recognising abundance where we commonly focus on lack; participation – a prioritising not of what is done so much as a right balance of who does it; partnership – allowing perspective gifts to be harnessed; enjoyment – valuing something and someone for their own sake; and glory – naming the purpose of all things to see God in Christ in this person and place.

Having established these eight characteristics theologically in earlier work, Wells is here applying them in these companion works to the ministry and mission of the church. He views the Christian life in three parts: discipleship – our relationship to God; ministry – relationship inside the church, including taking particular roles to build up the body; and mission – relationship to the world. *Incarnational Ministry* focuses on the first two parts as being interrelated and each chapter reflects on how different aspects of ministry can be reimagined when understood as “being with” and its eight characteristics. The chapters reflect on being with: God; Oneself; Creation; God Together; Child; Troubled; Hurt; Afflicted; Challenged; and Dying. There is a simplicity to this eight-part structure of each chapter that is kept stimulating by Wells’s intertwining of deep theology, practical insight, fundamental questions and topical anecdotes from novels and news.

I highly recommend this work for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of the Christian life, for either personal reflection or group discussion. The latter chapters provide particularly valuable descriptions of being with the troubled, hurt, afflicted and dying bring insights that at once inspire and challenge, while dealing with very real questions we sometimes shy away from asking. For example, when discussing “hurt”, Wells candidly asks: why, if Jesus has brought peace, is there so much violence? Why has the church failed to heal violence? Indeed, why has the church so often perpetrated violence itself? In dealing with these questions, Wells describes a vision of peace as a process of being drawn into the life of the Trinity that is at once practical, scriptural and hopeful.

At first I assumed this book was primarily relevant for those in traditional ministry roles, but these latter chapters in particular made it clear that this is for every Christian. There are elements of being with the afflicted and dying, as Wells depicts them, that require a level of intimacy and relationship to realise but are beautifully powerful when they take place. I find this book stimulating, enriching and challenging, leaving me with a deep question: how can we be this kind of people and community who can truly be with those around us and seek out the lost and lonely who have no one else to come alongside? This is a book to be read slowly,

prayerfully and with a willingness to change.

Sam Pollard, University of Bristol

6. OTHER

Arani Sen, *Holy Spirit Radicals* (Welwyn Garden City: Malcolm Down Publishing, 2018)

Arani Sen’s *Holy Spirit Radicals* was not quite the book I was expecting: it was much better! Sen is an Anglican vicar working in Upper Armley, Leeds. He is also a member of the New Wine Network. In the interest of openness and full disclosure I confess that I too am an Anglican vicar working in a northern city and am a member of New Wine. One of the criticisms often levelled at charismatics is that we do not engage with the social and political contexts in which we live and minister, focusing only on personal salvation and experiences of the Holy Spirit. This is changing and Sen’s book reflects this change.

Holy Spirit Radicals is based around a study of the first 11 chapters of book of Acts. Each chapter begins with an issue facing the church in Acts and then proceeds to look at a similar issue facing the church in Britain today. For example, in chapter three, Sen’s starting point is the healing of the beggar outside the Temple by Peter and John. He then outlines the social divisions in Greco-Roman society and in contemporary Britain. He then introduces us to a church or Christian group addressing this issue today. Finally Sen challenges his readers to respond prayerfully and practically in their own situation.

Refreshingly Sen is as concerned with the renewal of society, and a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led church engaging with the challenges around us, as he is with personal experience of the Holy Spirit. In the introduction he writes: “Three strands came together in my life, and these remain my passions; encountering personal salvation, receiving a baptism of the Holy Spirit and a love of justice” (p.5). He presents us with a rounded understanding of salvation and discipleship. His focus is on the kingdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through the church today, bringing redemption to individuals and communities just as God was at work in and through the church that we meet in Acts. Sen challenges churches and Christians to fully engage with their communities, becoming God’s agents for change in God’s world today.

Sen makes good use of Philip Esler’s *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* to help the reader understand the social and political context of Jesus and the Early Church and points his readers to similar issues facing

the people and communities today. Such an approach to the Scriptures will be new to many of Sen's readers.

I would recommend *Holy Spirit Radicals* for personal study, but especially for use by house groups or as an interesting and challenging follow up to *Alpha* or *Christianity Explored*.

Tim Gill, Sheffield

ANVIL: JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY AND MISSION



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