

# God: Some Conversations

How do you speak about God?

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Participant Papers

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ST GEORGE'S HOUSE CONSULTATIONS

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***How to Speak of God When You Don't Know What They Think They Know. A Reflection on Pastoral Encounters Involving Infant Baptism.***

## **How to Speak of God When You Don't Know What They Think They Know. A Reflection on Pastoral Encounters Involving Infant Baptism.**

### **Scene Setting:**

I have been the Incumbent of St Columba's Church, Banners Gate, in Sutton Coldfield since July 2018. The church is situated on a large crossroads which is one of the main intersections on the edge of Sutton Park. The large junction offers a clear physical divide between the different areas that make up our parish of 7,000 souls. One quarter of our parish could be described as rural. It is dominated by beautiful parkland, which is open to all and has a wonderful playground, with huge amounts of wild space to explore, indeed it is easy to get lost in it, and many have! Two quarters of our parish could be defined as suburban, with residential housing estates made up of in demand and increasingly sought-after properties, built between the 1950's and 1970's. The final quarter of the parish includes a large council estate, where crime rates are high, schools are never full and food poverty is a very real issue. The crossroads reflect the boundary lines and sadly movement between them is increasingly limited.

Many in the congregation (we have an electoral role of 65 and a weekly attendance of 50) helped their parents dig the foundations of the church and have worshipped there ever since. The majority are of the baby boomer generation who once lived on the local council estate, and having moved 'out' they often need to be reminded to see all our parish rather than just the three quarters that they now identify with.

Since lock down we have experienced an 50% increase in requests for baptism from all areas of our parish. This is a wonderful development and one that I am encouraging the church to embrace. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a huge disconnect between the baptismal families coming into church, often experiencing a worship service for the very first time, and the church congregation regarding both an understanding of faith and behaviour. My predecessor held infant baptisms outside of the main act of worship, a practice that I have continued, although my hope was always to eventually draw them into our 10am service. However, I am beginning to consider whether that this might hinder the connections and relationships that we are beginning to build with the families that we are encountering and am in rush to change current practice.

Our policy for infant baptism requires families to join us for a service before booking a baptism. If a family live out of parish, we encourage them to contact their local church and I am in regular contact with my colleagues regarding this situation. We do offer the opportunity for families to establish a qualifying connection for baptism, just as we would for a wedding service. Once a booking has been made, I then visit the family and we discuss the Christian faith through the words and actions of the service. I go to each visit with my bag of props: with my CPAS video 'First Steps'<sup>1</sup>, a bottle of water, a cross, a torch, a engagement ring and a bible.

I would note here that nearly all enquires made by parents are made using the language of Christening rather than baptism. Both pastoral encounters described began with a request "to get my child christened."

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<sup>1</sup> CPAS Video 'First Steps' (2005) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsCDVe\\_PH-Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsCDVe_PH-Q)

**Pastoral Encounter 1: From just over the road – 1960's suburbia, congregation land.**

I visited with a married couple who want their first child baptised.

The Father's mother used to come to St Columba's when she was a child and has encouraged a christening for their baby daughter, her daughter. The parents are keen for this to happen but a bit nervous. Both were baptised as infants but in their words "haven't really done church, apart from school and Brownies" although Dad has one brother in the army and they "like what the Church does for Remembrance Day, that matters to him, and us."

They appreciated watching the CPAS video and it sparked some good discussion. The theme of being on a journey was equated to being "a bit like in 'Strictly (Come Dancing), they're always on a journey, you see them develop and change don't you. They get better at stuff." The concept of turning away from the "bad stuff" was commented on, "I like the turnaround bit – that makes sense to me, but can you turn around more than once? God gets angry about that doesn't he?"

When asked what they felt about the Christian story as highlighted in the video Dad replied "It's not like I disagree, it's just, I'm not religious, well I mean I am Christian but just more spiritual I suppose..... is that ok? I do want her baptised though and I wouldn't mind if she was religious."

**Pastoral Encounter 2: From the right-hand side of the crossroads – the council estate.**

The whole family were present for my visit, Nana is the head of the household, which includes two daughters (younger daughter is the mother of baby to be baptised), one brother and now a grandchild. No one in the family is in paid employment, the brother volunteers with a local mental health charity. The father is not named on the birth certificate and has no contact with her or the family at all.

When I visited, Nana met me on the drive who wanted to find out how I felt about snakes. My response was that I didn't mind them but would rather not have to hold one if that was ok. Nana, laughed nervously and said "don't worry, you won't have to do that, but just so you know that we've got a pet snake – I just wanted to let you know so you could pray before you came in" a little confused I replied that it wouldn't be necessary and went in. As I was leaving Nana took me to say "thank you for staying and for praying for us. I wasn't sure you would. I know we've got snakes, but this is not a devil house." Unpacking that statement took a while and I finally left assuring her that although snakes are referred to in scripture and often used as the personification for evil, she and the household were not damned (her words) by owning a pet snake,

Mum stopped going to school at the age of 13 and has very limited literacy skills. However, since finding out she was pregnant she had been attending an adult literacy programme and was very proud to be able to read parts of the service with

me during our preparation time together. The CPAS video was very useful in prompting conversation in this regard, although it does feel a little dated. The family watched it together and the comments afterwards included: “that was nice” and “it was really long,” (the video runs for 9 minutes and 51 seconds). Once finished the response was “so if we don’t come to church afterwards does it not count?”

When I visit, I always ask the question “What do you hope for your daughter in her baptism?” Mum’s response was that she wanted “to make her right and good cause I love her, and I want her to be loved.” Indeed, throughout the whole visit the need for love and to know that she was loved was voiced repeatedly by all the family, we talked of God’s love, prayed for the baby and each member of the family and there was no doubt that although the visit was a complicated encounter it was a positive one.

On the day of baptism, the brother, who was going to be a Godparent, was very anxious about being involved and stood outside unsure about coming in. After talking with and praying for him I was able to get him inside, but only after he was assured that he wouldn’t be struck down by lightning for not being perfect when he spoke his words in the service. This was a very real concern for him.

After the baptism I gave Mum a copy of Rachel Held Evans book “what is God like?”<sup>2</sup> with the hope that it might encourage some different conversations about God. Mum and Sister now come to church about once every 6 weeks. They don’t bring the daughter and will not receive a prayer of blessing, which is offered to them each week.

### **Analysis and Reflection**

Like many of my colleagues I sometimes find myself wondering what God might be doing as we connect with new families through infant baptism. However, I am delighted that we are being given the opportunity to connect with families in this way and find myself worrying much less about how well prepared I am as I visit and far more concerned with discovering how a parent articulates what they know of God. Increasingly I am asking less questions and simply listening more to how they speak of God.

In the listening I am learning that the people of Banners gate speak of God as a God of judgement, a God who will punish, or at least offer a ‘Paddington hard stare’ if you get something wrong or don’t follow the rules. God desires perfection and ‘holiness’ if one is to be truly accepted. They understand God to be a God of love, but also a God who requires the ‘right kind’ of love or whose love is conditional on being good and behaving correctly. Jesus and God are rarely spoken of together and the Holy Spirit is a surprising addition to the mix. Sin is an unpopular word, (note the “bad stuff” description in Encounter 2) but a discussion of evil is often fruitful and can help develop an understanding of the declaration ‘I turn to Christ.’ There is a desire to be a part of something but working out how to be ‘in’ rather than ‘outside’ of God’s love is something based on behaviour rather than belief.

People feel that they are familiar with the Christian faith, but they are only aware of small parts of God’s character and God’s story. This leads me to reflect on the ways in which we speak of God and how we share our story. What have been teaching

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<sup>2</sup> Held-Evans, Rachel “*What is God Like?*” Crown Publishing Group New York 2021

and how have we engaged with people in the past? Members of St Columba's Church see this lack of faith understanding as a lack of respect, or even part of the class divides that our crossroads highlights. Presumably they mean that educated, wealthy people like themselves inherently know more of God! There is also sense of distress that schools no longer teach faith and that younger generations no longer engage with church.

Murray's recent work on Church in a Post Christendom Society suggests that such confusion, and a half-understood Gospel message is to be expected in what he describes as the transitional period of movement from Christendom to Post Christendom<sup>3</sup>. Parents that ask for infant baptism are often now the third generation of those who are largely unchurched. For them, the Christian story is neither overly familiar or well understood, which means that any form of faith based, or evangelistic conversation requires an intentional emphasis, that aims to do more than presume it can revive faith or challenge lukewarm discipleship and behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, my encounters lead me to reflect on how we speak of God week by week at St Columba's Church. If a 10-minute video is considered long, what is to be made of a 10-15-minute sermon which often presumes some knowledge of the Christian faith to be fully understood? On baptism visits I often find myself I often recommending #charliemackesy on Instagram and Niteblessings and the Corrymeela Community on Facebook as a way of allowing people to connect their lives and emotions spiritually in a new way. The groups mentioned offer short and simple liturgies and visual aids that can be easily accessed and shared with others. They can be screen grabbed and carried around on a phone, held close for the day. They also allow for the development of a vocabulary that helps the articulation of faith, something that I don't think we practice enough as church. The Rachel Held Evans book I mention in Encounter 1 also offers different ways of thinking and speaking about God, which allow people to reconsider what they know of God's character.

I noted as I described the context in which I serve that most of the families that I meet with request a christening for their child and throughout this reflection I am aware that I have used the language of baptism. I suspect that this in part can be blamed of being christened as an infant and becoming a Christian through Alpha as an adult! Sarah Lawrence in her book *A rite on the edge* has encouraged me to reconsider this use of language and the implied theological position it carries with it.

Within my family a christening was basically an excuse 'a bit of a do' but it was also valued as an occasion of importance. Lawrence recognises this to be the case for many clergy and suggests that using the word 'baptism' refers more to the theology of the sacrament<sup>5</sup>, and that when using the word 'christening' a parent understands it as

"An occasion with deep meaning, confirming a person's name, family and place in society ... they are asking for God's blessing on the child and the family." And that it is "an approach that views the Church as an institution that holds together society

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, Stuart "Post Christendom Church and Mission in a Strange New World" SCM Press London 2018 page 188

<sup>4</sup> Murray, S "Post Christendom Church" p166

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Sarah, "A Rite on The Edge. The Language of Baptism and Christening in the Church of England." (SCM Press, London 2019) p17

and celebrates it and includes all who want to be included. It is an approach to religion that sees it as the setting in which all of life, the social the practical, the economical, the emotional, as well as the spiritual is lived.<sup>6</sup>

I see that expectation in the families that I meet, and I find myself reconsidering what we put on our own literature and website – how are we communicating and speaking of God and our traditions, and shouldn't we be using words that the people we serve are familiar with and recognise?

Lawrence has worked with the Life Events Team and recalls the negative feedback received from Clergy when the team decided to use the word 'christening' in their outward facing literature but suggests that by not using the words that are more familiar in society we run the risk of missing opportunities to talk of God clearly in ways that are relevant to those we are meeting day by day.<sup>7</sup> I understand the challenge of speaking gospel truth and holding to doctrine but I also want to speak of God in way that is accessible and easily understood.

Murray argues that we are already a part of Post Christendom, and that any form of Post Christendom mission, which includes the use of the occasional offices in a parish, must be uncoupled from 'inviting people to church'<sup>8</sup> and be understood as an encounter with God. I feel this acutely within my context. Baptismal (perhaps I should practice saying christening) families view this as a belonging, a spiritual commitment, the church congregation see it as a commitment to make church home, to be present each Sunday and to commit to rotas. They are always let down by occasional attendance and limited engagement and I am attempting to help them value the new relationships that we are developing as God given possibility and an answer to our prayers for the life of St Columba's

When I take a baptism service, I get out the register, place it on the altar, together we view their child's entry and look up the names of family members where appropriate. I celebrate a family's desire for celebration and connection. I agree with Lawrence when she states,

"I am convinced that we cannot judge a person's faith by whether or not they come to church. If a person wants their child to be christened, to be committed as a member of the Church and named as a Christian, I would in no rush to convince them that they are mistaken."<sup>9</sup>

I consider that my role is to journey with people whenever possible, to listen to the ways that they speak of God and understand their faith and then to offer words and ways of connecting with God which allow for the retelling of The Story whilst celebrating people's own experiences within it. Just like baptism, (and of course Strictly Come Dancing!) it is an ongoing journey, and one that requires ongoing prayer, attention to the work of the Spirit and a willingness to adapt and to meet people where they are at. Only then will I be able to understand what they think they know of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Sarah, "A Rite on the Edge" p38

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Sarah "A Rite on the Edge" p38-9

<sup>8</sup> Murray Post Christendom p170

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GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

WENDY BAUSMAN GRAY

*Becoming More Like Jesus: Connecting Head and Heart*

COLLEGE OF ST GEORGE – CLERGY CONSULTATIONS

BECOMING MORE LIKE JESUS  
CONNECTING HEAD AND HEART

Reverend Wendy L. Bausman Gray

Recently I read some comments in a daily meditation that immediately caught my attention. The remarks were given by the author, Dr. Diana Butler Bass, regarding her latest book: *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence*. She states that she wrote this book to focus on “the basic central reality of Christianity” as well as to share her response to the question that has been asked of her over and over by many people. That question is “Why do you stay Christian?” Diana’s response is “well, it’s because of Jesus...” (1)

As I am writing this, I remember that I had the same response to a different question regarding religion and spirituality—the upbringing of my only child. Years ago, I was in a counseling session, post-divorce, with my daughter and her clergy father. Her father had previously stated that our young daughter should be brought up in any religion she wanted. When the counselor asked why I had a different view and wanted my daughter to continue being brought up in a Christian church, my answer was, “it is because of Jesus.”

I remember a sermon illustration about a young child who was afraid of the dark. One night the child yelled out, “Daddy, I’m scared!” The father replied, “Honey, don’t be afraid. Daddy’s right across the hall.” After a brief pause the little voice is heard again. “I’m still scared!” The father continues to try and soothe the child and states: “You don’t need to be afraid. God is with you. God loves you.” After pausing longer, the child states quite vehemently, “I don’t care about God, Daddy! I want someone with skin on!” (2)

Out of the mouth of a child comes the words that even we as adults want---another human being who understands all the array of human feelings—fear, loneliness, anger, abandonment, and so forth. We want someone with skin on to comfort us, to be with us, to love us no matter what! And then the Creator of all sends the Beloved Child—Jesus---someone with skin on—to show us Truth, Love, and Life.

What a grand idea and what Love the Divine has for each of us to send God’s own heart to all of humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Son of God---fully human and fully divine, the Great Mystery. This is the Good News (I like to say the Great News) proclaimed to us in Luke

chapter two, as the late Presbyterian pastor Eugene H. Peterson writes in *The Message*: “There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them and God’s glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2: 8-12 *The Message*)

Being a Christian/Christ-follower for me means being like Jesus. It means being a disciple of Jesus and living into the journey of a relationship with Jesus. In seminary we talked a lot about rigorous scholarship of the scriptures. Indeed, some were world-renowned theologians and they, of course, were sometimes criticized for their views of Scripture. As students, we were challenged to read different theological scholars. To this day, I continue to value my seminary education and the broader theological and biblical views that I was shown.

Although seminaries can sometimes only stress the head knowledge, my seminary at the time began to explore more of the

spiritual/heart aspects of being Christ followers. They started looking at the various spiritual practices which I think often times seminaries just assume are part of a seminarian's life. The first spiritual practice they explored was having a spiritual guide. Numerous professors and staff members signed up to be mentors. I was excited to learn of this "experiment" and so I signed up to have a spiritual mentor. How fortunate I was to be assigned to a professor who had written two ground-breaking books concerning the equality of men and women and the ordination of women. He also was one of my systematic theology professors, as well as a friend, until his death several years after my seminary graduation.

In addition, there was a spiritual "flow" and foundation in that every professor opened classes with prayer—very sincere and heart-felt expressions of prayer. Many of the professors shared their own faith journeys/experiences and were open about their love for God and for others. And I especially enjoyed my preaching class with a Scottish professor who taught us how critical it is for a sermon to contain "the exegesis of scripture and the exegesis of life"!

Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, writes in the introduction in his book, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (acknowledging that he is

Catholic): “Only when the two come together, inner (heart) and outer (head) authority, do we have true spiritual wisdom. We have for too long, insisted on outer authority alone, without any teaching of prayer, inner journey and maturing consciousness. The results for the world and for religion have been disastrous.” (3)

When we look at Jesus and study his life and teachings in the Gospels, we see a well educated and deeply spiritual human being. Rabbi Jesus had a gift for telling parables by using the every day ordinary experiences of people’s lives. Crowds of people would gather round him and follow him. Jesus always saw the need for wholeness in people’s lives and therefore brought healing to their bodies, minds and spirits. Jesus also had a deep spiritual life with his Abba. He understood the limits of being human, and so he would restore his soul. He found quiet spots and soaked in Holy Presence and Divine Love. Indeed, Jesus models for us a balancing of our heads and our hearts—both gifts from the Holy One.

For me, the compassion of Jesus is the best example from the Synoptic Gospels of how we can be like Jesus in connecting our heads and our hearts. In the book, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry*, Dr. Andrew Purves explores the biblical meaning and

application of compassion found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Greek word verb “splanchnizomai”, which means “to have compassion”, is used several times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and it “literally means to have one’s bowels turned over” or to have “a gut-wrenching experience.” Dr. Purves continues, “this rather unusual New Testament verb refers to **a feeling of solidarity with another that is virtually physical in its effect.** (emphasis mine) There is nothing genteel or comely about compassion.” (4) (page 18)

In addition, Biblical compassion has an added nuance to it in that there is more to this word than the inner experience of feelings. When Dr. Purves taught his students about compassion, he would first have them write down the words that came to them when they thought of the word “compassion”. Some of the words the students wrote were pity (which sometimes is used in biblical translations for the word splanchnizomi) sympathy, empathy, mercy, love, care, concern, etc. The students would later learn that biblical compassion encompasses more than these words can express because “Biblically, compassion is an action word that does more than describe an admirable emotional state.” (5) (pp 14 & 15) **Compassion combines one’s inner feelings with action.** Biblical compassion feels so deeply within a person that it

makes the individual take action. Authentic compassion is something we feel within the depths of our hearts that “always leads to acts of ministry in which the situation is addressed in some way for healing or wholeness.” (6) (p. 17 Purves) Biblical compassion feels and does. Biblical compassion connects the head and the heart. Authentic compassion is being like Jesus.

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels we see Jesus bringing together his bright mind and loving heart when he has compassion upon people. And Jesus’ authentic compassion always leads to ministry. It always leads to the healing/wholeness of specific needs in people’s lives.

Andrew Purves writes regarding Jesus’ ministry of compassion: “Each account of Jesus’ compassion shows him responding to specific needs in specific ways, as the situation demands.” (7) (p.32) Jesus recognizes the distinctiveness of every human being, especially those who are considered outsiders for a myriad of reasons. Jesus treats each person as uniquely created in the Image of God and thus is treated with respect and compassion. Therefore in Dr. Purves’ eyes, compassion “is an orientation, an availability, a way of life, in which we allow situations of need to stake their claim upon us in their uniqueness. It is not a package of preconditioned responses.

Compassion is person-and-need specific; it is a situational ministry.

Compassion implies a freedom for ministry through openness to others in their suffering.” (8) (p. 32) This quote truly speaks to the “definition” of compassion requiring the head and the heart to be effective in one’s ministry of compassion.

I want to elevate three examples of Jesus’ authentic compassion from the Gospels which directly address the unique needs of individuals as well as groups/communities of people. The first story is a healing story and it comes from Matthew 20:29-34. A large crowd was following Jesus as he and his disciples were leaving Jericho. When two blind men, who were sitting by the road, heard that Jesus was going past them, they cried out for Jesus to have mercy on them. The two blind individuals persisted in yelling despite the crowd telling them to keep quiet. Jesus came to a stop and asked the two blind men, “What do you want me to do for you?” They replied, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” Matthew tells us that Jesus was “moved with compassion” and then Jesus touched the eyes of the two men. “Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.” Jesus felt empathy for the two men and Jesus did something about it. Jesus healed them. This is ministry.

In Mark 8:1-10 we read about the feeding of the 4,000 people who had been with Jesus for three days and were famished. So, Jesus calls his disciples together and Jesus says to them, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.” Once again, Jesus felt the movement within his body which urged him to do something for this mass of people and he gives the people a feast of fish and bread!

As I ponder this passage on Jesus’ compassion for the people, I am inspired by Jesus’ wholistic view of the people. He spent **three entire days teaching** them. (It is so easy to move right over this detail of three days of teaching. As an introvert, this would drain me to my core!) The people seemed to be hungry for knowledge, for truth, for spiritual growth; to hear a rabbi, a very learned man, talk to them—every day ordinary people—about the scriptures, about life, about God! Jesus was probably using parables and all the ordinary thoughts and experiences of the people to open their minds and hearts more to the truth about God.

Then Jesus is concerned about the people's physical well-being. So many of them had come quite a distance to hear him. They don't have an air-conditioned bus to get home! Most of them probably did not have any kind of animal transportation. Just their own set of feet! Jesus is troubled by the dual physical situation that 4000 people are facing: walking a long journey home and starting their journey starved—no food for three days! Indeed, Jesus had a gut-wrenching expression of compassion---he felt it and he did something---he took care of the people—body, mind and spirit! This is ministry!

Finally, in the feeding of the 5,000 people in Mark 6:30ff, we are aware of several situations coming together for Jesus personally and for his disciples. Jesus heard the tragic and painful news about his cousin, John, being beheaded. As the disciples returned from their own ministry experiences, they were excitedly sharing the wonders that had occurred. And Jesus gives an invitation to his disciples to rest and get away via boat from all the people; something which I believe Jesus needed very much for himself, too.

But there was to be no rest for Jesus and the 12 disciples. The huge number of people were able to get ahead of the boat by moving quickly on foot. As Jesus arrived on the land, he could see the huge

crowd of people waiting for him, and his heart broke for the people. “As he (Jesus) went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

These compassion narratives speak to me personally, because a huge portion of my life has been committed to being a shepherd, a pastor. My heart goes out to those who long to know that they are loved for who they are and that there is Someone who loves and cherishes them—God. My heart goes out to those who want to be taught, to learn, to grow in their own understanding of God. My heart goes out to those who desire to use their spiritual gifts for ministry in all its myriad forms. My heart goes out to those who hurt, who suffer, who need a shepherd, a pastor to walk with them through the highs and the lows of their lives. I want to be like Jesus.

Studying and moving deeper into the meaning of Jesus’ compassion in the Gospels is one way for Christ-followers to be more like Jesus. Authentic compassion pulls together what we believe with how we live. Jesus’ compassion can help us connect our heads and our hearts a little bit more in our journeys as a witness to God’s Love for all the world (kosmos—the Universe).

There is much more that one can write and discuss in being more like Jesus by connecting our heads and our hearts. Psychological type training such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator is one such tool. It is a way to have a deeper understanding of how God has “wired” us in the way we prefer to live out our lives. Understanding one’s spiritual gifts is another tool that enables Christ-followers to understand the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to us in our lives of service. Every gift is needed for us as a community of believers to be more whole in our ministry and in our lives. Through the years I have taught both and have seen the impact on individual’s lives when they begin to understand and embrace their uniqueness and gifts and in turn respect the distinctiveness of each human being, all created in the image and likeness of God. There is definitely much more to be written and discussed in being more like Jesus.

I close with words from a hymn that always moves my soul: /  
*Want to Walk as a Child of the Light.*

“I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus.

God set the stars to give light to the world. The star of my life is Jesus.

In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike.

The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.”(9)

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GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

GRANT BOLTON-DEBBAGE

*How we speak about God*

COLLEGE OF ST GEORGE – CLERGY CONSULTATIONS

## Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to write a short paper for this conference on how we speak about God in relation to where I perceive us to be as a National Church.

It is my intention to show that we have, over time and without intent, mixed up our priorities as a National Church and that if we would like to see a church that flourishes in introducing people to God, we must put our needs and our riches in the proper order. I will argue that we are currently working from a stance which primarily looks at how we hold onto our assets. Instead we should look at how best we can worship the one true God and how we share God's love with others. It is not that the former is irrelevant, and we can obviously see a natural overlap. However, we need a definite escape route from starting with such a worldly view.

I hope that I will show evidence as to how this is the case and that if we do change position, how we might really be a transformative voice in a world that grows ever-more difficult.

Post-Pandemic, the Church of England has had to look at itself in terms of who we are, what we are called to and, ultimately, to whom we are accountable. This is best illustrated in the various papers that are coming through the House of Bishops and General Synod. Most notably, perhaps, in the recent paper written by The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell about being 'simpler, humbler and bolder.'<sup>10</sup> In this paper, ++Stephen determines that financial strains, social change and technological advancements have all had a part to play in the National Church seeking to understand new ways of *being church*.

One only needs to look at the national statistics for the church of England which shows a financial picture that is less positive than

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<sup>10</sup> Simpler, Humbler, Bolder A Church for the whole nation which is Christ centred and shaped by the Five Marks of Mission, Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, General Synod June 2021

it once was.<sup>11</sup> Almost half of our finances come from giving, and yet our numbers in terms of the traditional understanding of church attendance is in steady decline.

Archbishop Stephen's paper is helpful in sharing the issues of our day – peppered with enough theology to justify some of the proposals. We recognise, instinctively that these are necessary concerns to contend with but one can be forgiven in thinking that relevance has overtaken revelation. This is because the starting point is one of financial fear. If this is the case, and I believe it is, the god about whom we speak to the nation, may no longer be the God that we are actually called to worship and serve.

I believe we can and should aim to get to a place of pragmatic piety. A way in which we can stay authentic to the Word of God as we have come to understand it and inviting others to experience the One in whom we live, breathe and have our being. All this can and should be achieved whilst ensuring that we remain good stewards of the enormous wealth and portfolio of assets we have but in that order.

This paper will likely ask more questions than provide answers, but it might just be that some of these questions have not yet been heard wide enough or discussed deep enough for us to engage in a proper discourse about where we really are.

### **Where are we now?**

To illustrate the perceived issues of the Church of England at this moment in time and ideas of how to move forward in this subject, I would like to look at some key portions of scripture:

Let us start with a bittersweet story as found in Ezra 3:12 -13. A story within which fear and hope hold the same space.

*“But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they*

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<sup>11</sup> Parish Finance Statistics, 10 year overview (2011-2020)  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/researchandstats> p.12

*saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away."*

As we know, this portion of scripture looks at the restoration of the temple and the two responses it attracted - weeping and shouts of joy. The older prophets wept for the past, remembering how great things once were and how much 'lesser' they had seemingly become. Other members praised God for the ability to build on the foundations of the past and recognised Him doing a new thing. Is this not what we see working itself out over and over within the life of the Church of England? Contending with tradition, reason and scripture is no easy task and it often leaves people in one of these two camps. A prime example can be seen in the discussion concerning the place of the parish church and the 'Save the Parish' campaign.

The past, the present and the future at best is in perfect tension. Perhaps the blueprint for this can be seen in 'The Holy and Undivided Trinity' itself. As Richard Rohr<sup>12</sup> asserts, the Father is the source – the one from which all things begin. The Son is the person, the living manifestation of Christ walking with us here and now. The Holy Spirit is the 'Implanted Hope' which leads us forward. Of course, this is a mere illustration of which more could be said, nevertheless it makes the point that whenever a focus occurs on one element more than the other, the tension breaks and the imbalance which follows causes lack of clarity.

It seems to me that the Church has come to a place whereby the focus has become somewhat blurry. Issues that present themselves on the surface, though they are of great importance, have outweighed the original imperative as to who we are and why we are here.

By way of example, let's look at social projects and well-meaning campaigns. I recall churches with Black Lives Matter flags,

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, SPCK Publishing 2016

rainbow flags and foodbanks. These are all so very important, but we tackle them at the surface rather than digging deeper to uproot the cause. This then means that they become a goal in and of themselves, rather than a bi-product of who we are and who we serve and our original gospel imperative. This being the case, it poses the question as to whether we are anything more than a clanging cymbal just waiting for the next problem to try and solve? Are we chasing after the praise of people in today's generation rather than offering something that moves us at a deeper level? Where are our prophets? How are we really speaking truth to power in more than an open letter to a newspaper?

We must not fall into the trap that the one-time Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, William Inge spoke of when he said

*"One who marries the spirit of an age, will be the widow of another."*

If the virtues upon which we stand – fortitude, prudence, justice, temperance, hope, faith and charity - came as a priority above financial fear and looking relevant, perhaps we would be in a position to lead the nation's voice on such human rights as opposed to catching up and being swept along from project to project and placard to placard.

### **The original Imperative**

What is this original imperative? No doubt, this too could be debated until the Parousia itself, nevertheless there are some characteristics upon which we can all agree.

Matthew 28:19-end

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching** them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And **remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**'*

Luke 9:1-6

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to **cure diseases**, and he sent them out to **proclaim** the kingdom of God and **to heal**. He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.' They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.*

Matthew 25:31-40

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for **I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.**" Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

What I love about these readings which so beautifully describe the colours with which the living church is to be painted, is that they all have the same process. They start from knowing God, they continue on to being blessed by Him and thereafter these acts of liberation and reacquainting people with their dignity takes place. It is centred on God as made known in Jesus Christ. It is the

outpouring of His love and therefore made all the more powerful. A power which is needed when we are dealing with unjust structures built up and kept in place by the very opposite to good (however one might choose to describe that force). A spiritual battle must lean into spiritual strength and not worldly assets.

### **Binding pragmatism and piety**

The Rt Revd Dr Graham Tomlin writes that The Church and The Kingdom are not the same thing but rather the church exists to show what life is like under the rule of God. They are to be ‘provocative reminders of Jesus’ kingdom.’<sup>13</sup> +Graham goes on to suggest that we need to go back to resembling something of the revolutionary cells that could be found in 1st Century Palestine.

This all sounds romantically simple and something we could surely all get on board with. However, pragmatism is our friend here and we need to look at the practicality of The Church of England as we now find it.

In Luke’s account of sending out the twelve, His followers took nothing more than the bare basics. The basic needs of clergy have now, of course, changed. Where once a tunic and a sturdy bit of footwear would suffice, clergy now require housing, a stipend that meets current living standards and more often than not, a building from which to undertake and prepare for mission. All of this requires a number of administrative staff, maintenance help and financial wizards to manage. This in turn needs funding. The question then becomes, how we can realistically, pragmatically offer authentic ministry with all of these responsibilities with which to contend. Notwithstanding the social pressures which want to hold us accountable for the social status we currently have – perhaps even more than before as we live in an increasingly secularised nation. Have we grown too big in assets that we have diminished our message?

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<sup>13</sup> The Provocative Church, Graham Tomlin, SPCK Publishing, Third Edition 2008

I would argue that we need to get back to basics with who we understand God to be. It sounds so patronising to say, but have you ever looked at clergy twitter accounts? Have you heard the way in which people in General Synod speak to each other? Therein lies a clue as to who we understand God to be. Have you heard how the discourse around God becomes diluted to no more than dogma and politico-liturgical correctness? When will we remember that this is GOD! The one who created the heavens and the earth. This is GOD! The one who turns water into wine! This is GOD who proclaims to Peter that Hades will never prevail over His Church. This is GOD!

It strikes me that we have gone some way in losing touch with who God is and instead find ourselves arguing about the god we want in our corner. The god of liturgical rite, the god who can keep our financial standing the same for just a little longer and the god of do's and don'ts.

Surely, when we become reacquainted with Almighty God, we will be set free to take up a ministry that at its heart involves moving through the cross and not around it. We can cease to weep about those things which look different to what we are used to because we will remember that who we are is still built on the foundation which always remains the same. We can put aside concerns about how many people sit in our pews because we are ensuring that racism is rooted out and LGBTQI people are set free from the imprisonment of shame! We can stop worrying about airing grievances on twitter because our hands are far too busy feeding the poor! Ironically, when we do this from the right place, no doubt more people would be interested in our driving motivation.

From what is heard nationally and certainly from what I experience in the vibrant parish of New Cross, there are unseen but much felt pressures on where we are to focus. On the one hand, the ordinal offers a structure, my first sense of calling helps

to anchor me but on the other hand, the weighty responsibility of being a project manager, salesperson, teacher, social worker and events manager – all with unseen markers of ‘success’ - turn my head to a god that is diluted to mere survival and numbers.

### **In Conclusion**

The issue is that we have begun to introduce God to the world in a way that has become apologetic, fearful and uncertain. We are not all going to agree theologically and nor should we expect to. We are not going to maintain the status quo of the past – when has God ever allowed that? We ought to all take the power and authority given to us to prophetically offer God’s liberating love to all. We should all be prepared to lay down our lives for the message of love. By this, I don’t necessarily mean literally, but whilst we have the expectation of a middle to upper class social standing by virtue of a collar around our neck with what is often the most expensive property in the parish to live in, we are at risk of building ministry around what we have as opposed to who we serve.

I am personally immensely grateful for the work and ministry of those who have gone before that I might work in a parish system which enables all places to have easy access to a sacred space set aside for worship, but equally, if what we have becomes a stumbling block rather than a help, we must adapt. For things do change (much to our dismay) and we must not hold on so tightly to the vessel that we forget that which flows through it. We must be willing to let go! By doing so, we can show who we understand God to be. In such an instance, how we speak about God will have more transformative power.

If my stipend must go down to that which an individual parish can afford, rather than a national minimum, I must be willing to still be ready at all costs to proclaim the gospel as opposed to make my calling dependent on the coins. Selling the sacrifice of ministry is difficult and counter-intuitive. But we have now come to a point whereby the advertisements for posts in the Church

Times seem to put more weight on how large the rectory garden is and the fact that it has good schools in the neighbourhood before a sense of calling to serve. Is this not a case of warming ourselves by the fire whilst Jesus is being walked to the cross?

How we speak about God depends on whether we truly acknowledge who He is or if we dilute Him to what we want or need in a particular season of the church's life.

We must come back to practice pragmatic piety and thus put things back in the correct order. We must care for the assets we have inherited but we must remember that is not the primary call. Our sense of purpose and dependency should get back to being from God, not our assets, who even with twelve people and only sandals on their feet transformed the world.

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STEPHANIE FOUNTAIN

*Women and Girls' Music Making in Cathedrals*

Women and Girls' Music Making in Cathedrals - Revd Preb Stephanie Fountain

The Church of England has at the heart of its values an aspiration to provide genuine equality of opportunity as an employer. This is underpinned by a deep theological conviction that we should respect and value all God's people and their gifts. One key area in which it might be thought to have made significant strides in recent years is in Gender equality. Ordained women are now represented at most levels within the church. Lay women have for some time served in senior positions in National and Diocesan posts and committees. However, as employers of musicians, there is a marked disparity between men and women employed at the same level of professional expertise. This matters because if our liturgy is to be truly 'the work of the people of God', then it is important that it is offered by the whole people of God.

There has been significant progress towards ensuring that it is now possible for girls to have the opportunity to sing in our Cathedral choirs. This is to be celebrated. However, there is still a persistent and perhaps unacknowledged perception that music making is really the preserve of men. There are certainly practical and cultural barriers for women to overcome if they are to embark on trying to pursue a professional career in Church music. Whilst there are still so few women working in this sphere it is hard for young women to find role models, and the encouragement which they need to give them the confidence to apply for scholarships and positions which will help them on their way.

Cathedrals are places where the standard expected is one of excellence. Consequently the training which choristers, organists and conductors receive is something which will stand them in good stead should they decide to embark on a music career themselves in later life. However, it is still the case that women's employment prospects as professional singers in a Cathedral or similar setting are far fewer than those available to men. In 2020 there were just 70 women lay clerks or choral scholars, out of a total of 410 nationally. As organists and Directors of Music women are still very much in the minority. Currently, only 10% of the permanent Directors of Music and organists in English and Welsh Cathedrals are women. ( 1) There are just four women Directors of Music, one of whom is the Director of the Girls choir only, and four women assistant organists. The picture is a little more encouraging in Oxbridge colleges. There are currently 7 female directors of Music in Cambridge and 3 in Oxford. However, 3/5 of the Oxbridge choral foundations still haven't had a female organ scholar.

The picture is a little more encouraging when one looks at the figures for boy and girl choristers. In 2020 there were 1400 regular child choristers in Church of England Cathedrals, of which 650 were boys and 750 were girls. The choral foundations at Westminster Abbey, the Chapel Royal and Hampton Court still only admit boys, while St George's Chapel Windsor has just announced that it will admit girls from 2023. In Cambridge, the choral foundation at Kings is still boys only, whilst in 2021 St John's announced that it would begin admitting girls to its choir this year. In Oxford, Christ Church and Merton have now founded separate girls' choirs, leaving Magdalene and New College as boys' only choirs. A lot of progress has been made since Salisbury Cathedral first

recruited girls in 1991. Achieving this has taken time and has not been easy. Whilst offering equal opportunities has been the intention, the practicalities have meant that the way in which girls' choirs have been set up have been very varied.

Most cathedrals have continued to keep boys and girls choirs separate, two, Manchester and Rochford, have now fully integrated the girls, so that the treble line is always 'mixed'. Interestingly St John's College Cambridge too is intending to integrate girls in this way into its choir. In some settings the choirs are deployed separately on some occasions, but join forces for the major festivals, concerts and special services. Each place has had to take decisions based on their own circumstances and resources.

The decision about which course to take is not necessarily one based on a view about the relative merits of each voice. Sometimes it is more practical considerations which govern such decisions. In some cases this has been because of disparities in where the choristers have been drawn from. It has not always been possible for choir schools to accommodate girls, therefore a lack of boarding facilities and travel needs have made a significant difference to the way in which the girl's choir has been able to schedule rehearsals, and take part in services.

In the early days of establishing a choir, there is a great deal of musical training which must be put in place to get the choir to an acceptable working standard. Starting a new choir from scratch is an entirely different exercise from recruiting new probationers, and gradually integrating them into an existing cohort. On these grounds alone, it has made sense to treat the boys' and girls' choirs as separate entities in the beginning of establishing them in the life of a Cathedral.

Generally the curriculum which both boys and girls follow is the RSCM Voice for Life programme. It helps them to learn to pitch accurately, to control their breath, to project their voices, singing with precision and expression. The choristers learn to listen intelligently, to read music, follow a conductor and work in a disciplined way as a team. As they progress through the course, singers take exams and are awarded medals denoting the different levels of achievement which they have reached. This provides a very thorough standardised musical education. The only differences between the experiences of children in different choirs will be the frequency with which they rehearse and sing in public, the level of challenge provided by the music lists in their respective places of worship, and any extra singing engagements which will introduce them to a wider repertoire.

Of course the ages at which the children join their choirs may have a bearing on how quickly and how much of this programme they are able to cover during their time there. Some cathedrals have chosen to recruit girl choristers who are the same age as their male counterparts, several have girls who are consistently older than the boys, whilst others have girl choristers who are aged between seven and eighteen (i.e. both the same age and older). It is an undeniable fact that the quality of boys voices peak at around 11-12 years of age, after which they break and the boy's life in the choir comes to an end. Girls' voices tend to

mature 3 or 4 years later, so potentially the amount of time which a girl can be a choir member is much longer. This should set a girl up with the right skills to progress on to a place at one of the Colleges of Music as a singer, or to take up a choral scholarship at university. Her difficulties in finding work afterwards, if she wants to continue to sing professionally in a sacred setting, have already been noted.

In 1999 when Winchester cathedral introduced a girls' choir, David Hill, who was then the organist and master of choristers at Winchester Cathedral, interviewed in the *Independent*, **(2)** denied, in response to concerns raised by those who were worried about the loss of a unique tradition, that the boys' choir would suffer in any way. He said that the girls' contribution would be "complimentary but utterly independent", he said. "Think of the boys' and girls' choirs as wines. They are both lovely, but they are different. It's not as if one is a weak, awful apple juice and the other a good burgundy.'

There has been a good deal of research into the qualities of each voice, and whilst there are some differences, it is important to remember that, irrespective of the gender of the voices, no two choirs sound alike. Different conductors will want to achieve different results. The very bright boy's treble sound favoured by Sir David Willcocks at Kings for example, is not the same as the more 'earthy' treble sound favoured by George Malcolm at Westminster Cathedral, or the mellow sound of the Vienna Boys Choir, for example. Different girls choirs will also have a variety of timbres.

Be that as it may, there is undeniably a very strong attachment to the *idea* of the boys' choir. Adrian Lucas, the head of choral studies at the Royal School of Church Music, **(3)** observes that there has "inevitably been a bit of reluctance' about changing a tradition that dates back centuries. He agrees with other directors that there is a "certain chemistry" in an all-boys' group that is different from that found in mixed groups. In mixed groups, the danger is that more girls are recruited, he says, and that boys start to feel that it's a "girly thing to do". He explains: "If you have a critical mass of 16 to 20 boys working together, it is like a football team: it has a camaraderie . . . which counterbalances that they will get flak from school for doing something musical."

Whilst this may be a valid point, there is an implication in all this, that the traditional choir of boys and men is normative, the benchmark with which all other choirs should be compared. When state occasions using boys only choirs, and long and cherished traditions such as Carols from Kings, are *all* that the general public experiences through the media, it sets up an unconscious bias, which can be hard to shift. It would be wonderful for see mixed and girls' only choirs get a bit more air time.

Currently Directors of Music are trained first as organists, only progressing to positions of authority through this route. Their skills as conductors and vocal trainers are learnt 'on the job', at quite a late stage in their development as professional musicians. Timothy Day's research shows that the current practice in cathedrals for the Director of Music to conduct most services, whilst an Assistant plays the organ, had its origins in developments post-World War Two, before which the choir were not conducted by anyone. **(4)** Understanding how voices work, and conducting, do not necessarily require one to be an organist. There

are skills which can also be learnt at Music Colleges and University. Perhaps a re-assessment of career paths and roles is in order?

If being an organist really is a pre-requisite to being a Director of Music, then a more fundamental problem is that so few young people now have connections with churches where they can be inspired and encouraged to learn the instrument. Katherine Dienes-Williams, Director of Music at Guildford Cathedral has observed that 'In 1983 in New Zealand I was given the chance to have organ lessons through a scholarship available to me at my (independent) girls' school. Where are the schools and the scholarships for this to happen in the UK? Why is the organ not taken seriously as a musical instrument learning option across all schools in all sectors? Many children will never get to see or hear this instrument in their lifetimes.' **(5)** Her point about this opportunity being available to *all* sectors is an important one; otherwise the profession will only be open to those from Independent Schools, and possibly Oxbridge backgrounds.

Other problems which girls face are a lack of understanding about how careers as an organist can be built, and the lack of good role models. One person who is trying to do something about this is Anna Lapwood, Director of Music at Pembroke College Cambridge, who has established the annual Cambridge Organ Experience for Girls. Speaking to Classic FM in 2019 she said, "When I took up the organ, I really had no idea what world I was getting into... I feel there's a responsibility to help provide the opportunity for young girls to realise they could be an organist too. I think the reason they don't take it up is because they don't even think about it." She added: "They don't see visible female role models playing the organ.' **(6)**

Sometimes there are practical problems to be overcome. One difficulty which young women organists face, is that in many places where they practise, the organ bench is at a fixed height, and designed with men in mind. The average male height in the UK is 5ft 9in. The average female height is 5ft 3in. This disparity means that women students find it difficult to reach the pedals, balance or play comfortably, significantly affecting their performance. This can be simply remedied by making sure that an adjustable organ bench is available. The Society of Women Organists recently conducted a survey of 500 women organists and found that two thirds of them reported the lack of this simple solution to a very practical problem.

Another difficulty is that many women have simply not been brought up through the ranks, as many of their male counterparts have done, and are out of their depth as to what is required. Anna Lapwood describes her first term as organ scholar at Magdalen College: 'I turned up... having only accompanied a choir on the organ once before, and having no real knowledge of standard choral repertoire despite my best efforts to familiarise myself over the summer. I really struggled at first because I was having to learn everything for the first time, playing for 8 services a week whilst doing a degree, and generally existing in a very unfamiliar world. I vividly remember being asked to go and pick up the Psalters from the song school mid rehearsal and having no clue what a Psalter was... I was lucky that

everyone was very patient with me as I floundered around – there were several moments in my first term when I very nearly decided to quit ...' **(7)**

Hopefully, now that so many Cathedrals have girls choirs, this lack of familiarity with the culture and repertoire of church music will diminish, but it can still pose a difficulty. Not all performers will have had the benefit of this very specialised education. Being a good soloist is not enough. If women organists have never had experience of accompanying a choir, then they are bound to struggle at first. How students are prepared for scholarships and auditions is vital.

Another area in which there is a marked disparity of opportunity for women, is as composers. We have a wonderful inheritance of liturgical music, and it is not a surprise that the repertoire is top heavy with works by men since, for centuries, there have been so few opportunities for women. However, just 1.9% of repertoire performed by 34 Anglican cathedral choirs across the UK from 1st-8th May 2022 was composed by women. **(8)**

What can be done about this? The Society of Women Organists, together with the American Guild of Organists, has done research and compiled a directory of women who have written for the organ, and choral music for church services. They have unearthed a wealth of unknown women and their music that had disappeared with the passage of time. Each composer's works are listed online in a work catalogue. They also publish lists of suggested repertoire by women composers, themed by liturgical season. If Directors of Music were to consult this list when planning their repertoire for the coming season, and consciously try to include more works by women composers, this would be a step in the direction of making sure that our liturgical music is truly representative of the gifts of all God's people. It would also send a much more positive message to young aspiring women composers and musicians. If Cathedrals are commissioning new works, then one hopes that they consciously seek commissions from as wide a field as possible.

Finally, when Cathedrals are drawing up their Music Policies, there are some key things which could be included which might help girls, and women.

- When drawing up a Job Specification for the post of Director of Music, consider whether it is essential that the person appointed should be an organist, as well as proficient as a conductor, choir trainer, and capable of all the departmental administration.
- Ensure that the organ bench is at the right height to enable girls and women organists to work comfortably and encourage more girls to learn.
- Monitor the repertoire not just for variety of musical genres, and cultures, but also to audit the inclusion of music by women composers.
- Ensure that women organists are invited as part of recital series so that their presence as serious musicians becomes normative, and for the same reason, ensure that choirs with women directors are sometimes invited to lead worship in places where the Director of Music is male.

- To consider raising funds to offer commissions, bursaries and prizes specifically for women.

It is my hope that we will continue to make progress in ensuring that we do not waste the gifts which God has given women, and that we do our best to foster everyone's talents.

### **Footnotes**

- (1) [www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/statistics](http://www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/statistics)
- (2) 16 May 1999
- (3) Madeline Davies, 'What Girls are bringing to the Choir Party' , The Church Times, 27 May 2016
- (4) Day, T. 'English cathedral choirs in the twentieth century' in J. Potter and J. Cross (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Singing. Cambridge University Press. 2000, p130.
- (5) 'Spotlight' interview 8 March 2021, [www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/blog](http://www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/blog)
- (6) [www.classicfm.com/artists/anna-lapwood/organist-conductor-biography-age-instruments/](http://www.classicfm.com/artists/anna-lapwood/organist-conductor-biography-age-instruments/)
- (7) 'Spotlight on Anna Lapwood', June 11, 2021 - [www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/blog](http://www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/blog)
- (8) [www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/statistics](http://www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/statistics)

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GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

JACQUI HYDE

***The Oberammergau passion play: reflections on factors  
that affect the way we speak about God***

## **THE OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY: REFLECTIONS ON FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE WAY WE SPEAK ABOUT GOD**

**JACQUI HYDE**

The Oberammergau Passion Play has been performed in most decades since 1663, when it reputedly began. Its primary purpose has always been to bring to life the story of Jesus Christ's Passion and Resurrection, speaking about God through dramatic presentation. Over the centuries, the style and content of the Play has changed, reflecting changes in society, religious practice, and theology. In total, the Play has spoken about God to millions of people, making it a significant voice in the wider conversation.

When the Play was first performed, the Thirty Years War was raging across Europe, bringing starvation and plague in its wake. It was one of the most catastrophic periods of European history. Legend tells that the little village of Oberammergau took special measures to protect itself from the plague, insisting that visitors quarantined before entering. A young man called Kaspar Schisler had been working away from home and, in his eagerness to spend time with his family, sneaked past the village guards. Within a few days, he was dead, and infection was spreading, eventually killing about 80 villagers. The village leaders are said to have made a vow to perform the Passion Play every ten years, and no more people died after the oath was taken.

The Passion Play was first performed in the graveyard where the plague victims were buried. Until the 1800s, a few thousand people came each performance year, most of them from the local region. By the 1860s, there was a specially built stage and about 100,000 visitors came to watch the play, including a large number from abroad. The 2022 production was delayed from 2020 – the first time in its history that the Play has been seriously disrupted by disease. More than half a million tickets are being sold

for 103 performances between May and October. About 2,000 of the village's population of 5,000 will take part.

In an era when far fewer Europeans are familiar with biblical stories, the Play has enormous capacity for speaking about God to people of all faiths and none. As the 2022 production is in progress, there are some background factors that will shape the way the Passion Story will be told and heard. Considering these brings into focus some of the underlying dynamics at play as we speak about God today. In this paper, I will firstly consider the difference it might make to be speaking about God in a commercialised environment. Secondly, I will reflect on the potential of human prejudice and unconscious bias to distort the way we speak about God.

### ***Speaking about God in a commercialised environment***

To fulfil their vow, the villagers would only need one small, simple performance every ten years.<sup>14</sup> There are other reasons behind the enormous scale of this year's production, including a faith-based desire to share the story of Christ's Passion with a wide audience,<sup>15</sup> and also financial considerations.

The total budget for the 2022 programme is €45 million, with an anticipated profit in the region of €20 million.<sup>16</sup> This represents an enormous proportion of the economy of Oberammergau, which has a total population of about 5,000 people. Other villages in Bavaria have sometimes given residents of Oberammergau the nickname 'Oberammergauen,' which could be translated "Oberammergau scammers" or "Oberammergau crooks." The dependence of the local economy on a once-a-decade event has the potential have

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<sup>14</sup> Shapiro, 2000, p128 quotes Hans Schwaighofer saying in 1980: "If the people of Oberammergau were genuinely interested in fulfilling the vow, and only the vow, the play should be performed once, on the Passion Meadow, for free."

<sup>15</sup> Walker, 2020, p9 includes an article written by leaders from the churches of Oberammergau, Pfarrer Peter Sachi, Fr Thomas Gröner, and Dr Angelika Winterer, who say, "We truly want you to have a full 'Oberammergau experience,' – not just seeing the Passion Play but allowing it to have its full effect upon you."

<sup>16</sup> Figures quoted in an article by Andrew Eames, dated 22-03-2022, reproduced on the Financial Times website, <https://www.ft.com/content/01ecf367-6a04-4f0e-8072-7fc0b369f7cc>

unintended consequences, including some that could affect conversations about God.

The Passion Play is an amateur production, and those taking part have to fit their ordinary working lives around the demands of the schedule. Acting in the Play is not an opportunity for personal financial gain, but villagers have benefitted financially in other ways. In the earliest decades, for example, villagers started selling hand-carved wooden souvenirs to the visitors. They established a network of retail outlets across Germany and many villagers came home once a decade to take part in the Passion Play. There are families in Oberammergau that can trace their woodcarving business back these early days. Some of the woodcarvers are practising Christian whose faith underpins their work. Herbert Haseidl, a third generation Oberammergau woodcarver told a Deutsche Welle reporter, "If you carve religious figures but don't stand behind the faith, they won't turn out."<sup>17</sup> However, the primary motivation for carving items for sale is to make a living, rather than to speak about God. Increasing competition from around the world is making it increasingly difficult to maintain a viable profit margin.

As the number of visitors increased, so did the need for accommodation and catering. In 2022, almost every hotel room and restaurant will be involved in the logistical challenge of providing accommodation and meals to a total of more than half a million guests. At least since the mid-nineteenth century, part of the attraction for visitors was the romantic notion that Oberammergau was a village of old-fashioned piety and purity – a rustic paradise in which traditional practices and values were preserved.<sup>18</sup> It has been in the village's interests to maintain this impression, although this has meant keeping industrial or office developments at arm's length. This has reduced opportunities for economic diversification. It has also made it a challenge to make changes to the style or content of the Passion Play, even when these

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<sup>17</sup> Quote from an article by Daniel Scheschkewitz, dated 12.03.2010, reproduced on the Deutsche Welle website, <https://www.dw.com/en/bavarias-wood-carvers-struggle-to-keep-tradition-alive/a-5322594>

<sup>18</sup> Shapiro, 2000, pp112-121 explores this more fully

have been severely criticised. The dependence of the community on the Play has added to the difficulties of reviewing the way in which the script and production speak about God. When aspects of the Play have been denounced, the response has been slow – some would say much too slow.

The most serious accusations have condemned the Oberammergau Passion Play as anti-Semitic. This leads us to the second issue to be addressed in this presentation.

***Speaking about God: the role of human prejudice and bias***

Prejudice and unconscious bias are very real dynamics in human nature and society. The presentation of ‘the Jews’ as the villains of the Passion narrative was normalised and accepted across Europe from the Middle Ages onwards. The Oberammergau Passion Play script evolved from an essentially medieval one to a more ‘realistic’ and less allegorical text. The script prepared by Josef Alois Daisenberger in 1860 cast Caiaphas as an iniquitous leader. Judas was presented as a stereotypical money-hungry Jew, whose love of money was greater than his love for Jesus. There was also a major emphasis on the so-called ‘blood curse’ of Matthew 27, where it says that the Jewish crowd shouted, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’<sup>19</sup> This script continued to be used for more than a century. Alongside the Passion narrative, the Oberammergau Play also presents a series of *tableaux vivants*, many illustrating a series of stories from the Hebrew Scriptures and using them to illuminate and parallel particular moments in the Gospel narrative. Some of these have also been criticised as anti-Semitic, including the tableau depicting the sale of Joseph by his (greedy Jewish) brothers set alongside the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, and an Ascension tableau in which the Jewish crowd appears to be crushed underfoot.

After World War Two, there was increasingly strong criticism of anti-Semitism in the Oberammergau Passion Play, the repulsion of which was reinforced

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew 27:25, NRSVA

by its location in the country that had sponsored the Holocaust. Hitler himself had seen the play in 1930 and personally approved the script for a special 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary production in 1934. At a 1942 dinner, Hitler said of the Play, “Never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, there appears to have been no serious attempt to address the questions posed by critics for the 1950 or 1960 productions. During the 1960s, there was an attempt to undertake a major rewrite of the script, but the local committee voted to reject the new version. As a result, the American Jewish Congress called for a boycott of the 1970 production. The Vatican also withheld its traditional blessing.

The combination of religion and nostalgia has always been particularly resistant to change. Add the commercial risk of making changes to a ‘successful formula,’ it becomes less surprising that change came so slowly.<sup>21</sup> The pressure for revision rose as the continuing anti-Semitic focus was increasingly seen as unacceptable in a Play that purported to be speaking about God.

Finally, in 1990, a new script writer, Otto Huber, and director, Christian Stückl, were elected in a major ‘palace coup.’<sup>22</sup> They made some significant changes, but these were far from enough to satisfy the critics. The process had begun, however, and Huber and Stückl have continued to make further revisions to reduce potentially anti-Semitic references in each successive production. In 2022 production, Christian Stückl, is seeking to present Jesus as a reformist Jew, calling his followers to live out the true values of their religion.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is extremely unlikely that every concern of Jewish critics can be resolved without compromising the Christian message of the Passion Play

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<sup>20</sup> Fuquay, 2019, p85

<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, 2000, p6: “Given the weight of tradition and the unwillingness to tamper with four hundred years of success, change is often fiercely resisted.”

<sup>22</sup> Shapiro 2020, p19: “In 1987 Stückl and Huber were elected... by the margin of a single vote. The Munich *Merkur* called it a ‘palace coup.’”

<sup>23</sup> For more discussion see the article by Ken Chitwood, dated 27.05.2022, reproduced on the Christianity Today website, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/passion-play-easter-pageant-germany-oberammergau-covid19.html>

Concerns about typology and supersessionism are particularly difficult to address. Claims that Jesus is the Messiah promised and foreshadowed in Hebrew Scripture are central to the Christian faith, but cannot be accepted within Judaism. It is reasonably straightforward to present Jesus as a faithful practising Jew in his earthly life, and this would be acceptable to most Jews, and for that matter most Muslims. However, the Passion Play is based on the Christian belief that Jesus is the full Incarnation of God, the Christ, who was in the beginning with God, and through whom all things were made.<sup>24</sup> For Christians, Jesus is the Christ promised by the prophets,<sup>25</sup> who is risen, ascended, and glorified.<sup>26</sup> On these points, Jews and Christians will always disagree. If the Passion Play eliminated any reference to these concepts, it would not be a Christian play. However, it is important for the Passion Play to take care in its presentation of these parts of the story. For example, the Ascension tableau vivant of 1910 presented the scene with Jewish figures appearing to be crushed and trampled by the risen Christ.<sup>27</sup> This was a visual representation of the assumption that Christianity has triumphed over Judaism, an assumption that has strong anti-Semitic associations.

When speaking about God, there will always be fundamental differences between the words and meanings used by people of different faith traditions. It is always important to present the tenets of any faith in a way that respects the existence of other religions and does not generate or inflame inter-religious hatred or violence. This is even more important for an event on the scale of the Oberammergau Passion Play, being seen this year by half a million people and spoken about all over the world. The Play had a significant anti-Semitic focus even into the 2000s. Over the last 30 years, Otto Huber and Christian Stückl have listened to their critics and made an ongoing series of changes. However, it has not always been straightforward, partly due to the reluctance of the village as a whole to change a successful

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<sup>24</sup> See John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:15-20

<sup>25</sup> Acts 17:1-3

<sup>26</sup> Revelation 1:4-8

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, 2000, Illustration 4

formula, and partly because some of those involved simply couldn't see what was wrong. The Bible tells us that Judas betrayed Jesus and that money may have been part of his motivation, so it might seem reasonable to include this dimension in the Passion Play. However, it is all too easy fall into the trap of presenting Judas as the stereotypical money-grabbing Jew – an damaging stereotype that has been a terrifying driver of anti-Semitic violence for centuries, including all the horrors of the Holocaust, and still feeds anti-Semitic hatred today.

### ***What might the Passion Play teach us as we speak about God?***

The Oberammergau Passion Play has been speaking about God for hundreds of years to a total of millions of people. Drama brings stories alive in a way that engages more of our senses than reading or listening and we can find ourselves asking more questions about our own place in the narrative. Our society is increasingly visual rather than cerebral and this is posing some important questions as we continue to adapt our practice, always seeking to 'proclaim the Gospel afresh in each generation.'<sup>28</sup> On social media, people are much more likely to respond to posts that include photos or videos and very short passages of text. Christian drama has a new role to play in this world, and this may be one reason for the increased popularity of street dramas, including new Passion Plays. An ever-increasing proportion of Western society knows less about the stories of Christianity and are less likely to come to church to hear them. Outdoor drama in public places is one way to invite people who have little biblical literacy to explore the story of God and their own place within it.

The commercial dimension of the Oberammergau Passion Play is important. It is not the money itself that is dangerous; it is the impact it has on the people involved and on the wider community. In the case of Oberammergau, one of the biggest dangers is that the village is too economically dependent on the once-a-decade Passion Play. Allowing industrial or large-scale building development in the local area would have spoilt the beauty of the setting, and might have reduced the attractiveness of the Play to tourists who want to visit their idea of a rural idyll. This has restricted Oberammergau's ability to diversify its economy. It has also increased the difficulties of making changes to the Play. This in turn has slowed down the process of responding to criticism, even when the anti-Semitic focus of the Play attracted international condemnation.

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<sup>28</sup> Church of England Declaration of Assent, see <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/declaration-assent>

We live in a context in which money plays a key role, and all Christian churches have to manage their money well. In some churches, there are questions about how to allocate surplus funds according to Christian principles. In others, it is a struggle to pay the basic bills. In both of these situations, concern about money can have unintended consequences, one of which is often a degree of anxiety about making changes that might disturb the financial status quo. This anxiety and resistance to change have the potential to distort the way we speak about God.

The Oberammergau Passion Play has been severely criticised as anti-Semitic. Its roots lie a social context in which Jews were stereotyped as greedy villains, and this stereotyping was not unusual in art and literature well into the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Anti-Semitic bias was rarely criticised before World War Two.<sup>30</sup> However, the Play's anti-Semitism was criticised increasingly strongly from the 1960s onwards and it took a long time to be addressed. Some of this delay arose because villagers failed to understand what was wrong. Their unconscious bias blinded them to the way their production was seen and experienced by Jews. There were also other aspects of the Play that took time to change, usually much more slowly than changes in social norms, partly because of prejudice and unconscious bias. For example, married women were first allowed to perform as late as 1990, and then only after the case was taken to the High Court in Munich. The first year a Protestant was given a speaking part was 2010. The first Muslim actor is taking to the stage in 2022.

We all have unconscious biases, usually centred on what was considered normal and acceptable in the social environment of our childhood. When we speak about God to other people, our own prejudices and unconscious bias can (often unintentionally) distort our own and our listeners' understanding. It

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<sup>29</sup> TS Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene all used anti-Semitic language

<sup>30</sup> The Passion Play seen by Jerome K Jerome in 1890 and described in *Diary of a Pilgrimage* would certainly have been viewed as strongly anti-Semitic today, but he makes no reference to any of the characters being Jewish, seeing Judas, for example, as motivated by poverty without suggesting this reflected stereotypical Jewish greed.

is easy for us to condemn the long delay in addressing anti-Semitism in the Oberammergau Passion Play, but Jesus teaches us to take the logs out of our own eyes before trying to remove the speck from someone else's.<sup>31</sup> The nature of unconscious bias is that is, indeed, unconscious. What biases are affecting the ways our own conversations about God without us even realising they are there?

### ***Afterword***

I have written this paper a few days before setting off to see the Oberammergau Passion Play for the first time. It has been interesting to reflect on some aspects of its history and content, but I am confident that the experience itself will affect my thoughts in ways I cannot yet imagine.

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 7:3

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GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

JEREMY IVE

*Christian Peacebuilding*

## Jeremy G.A. Ive, Christian Peacebuilding, 23 June 2022

**Synopsis:** This paper sets out an approach to peacebuilding which suggests a systematic approach to “Track Two” peacebuilding on a Christian basis. It identifies two complementary roles which are involved: that of a catalyst identifying and suggesting ways around sticking points, and that of a consensus-builder, providing a non-partisan framework that all can provide a common basis for a peaceful future for all. How this can work through the pre-negotiation, negotiation, and implementation phases is sketched out briefly.

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The international situation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is beset by numerous inter-state and intra-state conflicts which the ending of the Cold War has not removed. Indeed, conflicts and tensions previously submerged or frozen by the super-power rivalry of that era have now come to the surface, particularly in the consciousness of the West following the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers in New York on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

The ensuing international interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq brought many tensions to the fore, not least as the ethical and legal basis for intervention – especially in Iraq – has been fiercely debated. Much less attention, however, seems to have been paid by those involved to the question of how exactly the sort of society hoped for could emerge and then be nurtured and supported.

The continuing crises such as Russian intervention in Ukraine, following the Maidan uprising with the Russian seizure of Crimea, with the breakaway of pro-Russian elements in the Donbas region, followed more recently by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, have brought the need for peacebuilding to the fore.

However, unless the underlying relational issues can be addressed and dealt with, any intervention is likely simply to foster instability and continuing conflict. It is also likely to store up hatreds and resentments not simply within the conflict situation but also against the intervening parties.

The reflections in this paper are the fruit of involvement in peacebuilding in a number of contexts: South Africa,<sup>32</sup> Rwanda,<sup>33</sup> Sudan,<sup>34</sup> Ukraine, and

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<sup>32</sup> [Jeremy Ive, “Peacebuilding and the ending of apartheid: A Christian contribution” Cambridge Papers, Vol 23, No 2 \(June 2014\).](#) See also <https://www.relationalpeacebuilding.org/en/history/>

<sup>33</sup> [Confidence-building and the achievement of a constitutional settlement in Rwanda: some guidelines: NPI Rwanda series paper no.3](#) See

currently, the Korean peninsula.<sup>35</sup> What follows is a distillation and an extrapolation of that experience.

## 1. The imperative to work for peace

Conflicts are destructive and divisive and are inimical to the growth of a truly God-centred society. They also distort community structures and inhibit the freedom essential for the healthy growth of all institutions – church, state, family, and the range of voluntary associations and enterprises which collectively make up what is called ‘civil society’.

Christians are called to seek peace with one another (Romans 12:18), and by implication between their respective communities. This command to create a world filled with a holistic sense of peace, *shalom*, does not mean turning a blind eye to injustice, be it personal or structural. Indeed, another imperative, that of *mishpat* (justice) requires all people, as bearers of God’s image, to work for the restoration of the shattered and distorted social order in which we live.

The achievement of justice is a necessary pre-requisite for the establishment of peace, but the justice to be worked for cannot simply be identified with the demands of any one class or party grouping – it must be truly impartial, without bias toward the rich or the poor. ‘You shall not be partial in judging: hear out the small and great alike...’ (Deuteronomy 1:17).

Christian peace-making is grounded in the work of Christ in whom all things are reconciled (Col 1:20), as indeed He is the One through Whom all things were made (Col 1:19). In the Christian understanding of God as Trinity, the relational call which Jesus embodies in himself as the ‘person

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also <https://relationalpeacebuilding.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Rwanda-Papers-1.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> [Strategy for Facilitating, Enabling, and Sustaining the Mutually Agreed Transitional Framework for Sudan -- A Road Map for Peacemaking](#)

<sup>35</sup> Michael Schluter and Jeremy Ive, ‘[A Relational Approach to Peacebuilding in the Korean Peninsula](#)’ February 2018 *International Bulletin of Mission Research*. See also <https://www.relationalpeacebuilding.org/en/>

for others' is set within the context of his call and authorisation by his Father, and within the empowering and transforming dynamic as given to him by the Holy Spirit.

Christian peacemakers are thus called to seek reconciliation in very real situations of conflict, without softening their opposition to the injustices which exist. Christian faith and the biblical vision for society do not mean that Christians cannot work with those from different faiths or none. As all humanity is created in the image of God one can expect to share common points of ethical concern with those from different faith communities.

## **2. Christian peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding is a specific form of peace-making. It is characterised by its systematic character and future orientation. It does not so much address current grievances as encourage those involved to look beyond the present conflict to ways of living peacefully together in the future.

Peacebuilding aims to sow seeds for a peace that includes all people and communities within a just and workable framework for the future – unique to each conflict situation – by finding common ground and then setting clearly defined and realistic goals. These goals need to be determined after careful consideration of all the relevant aspects of the situation being addressed.

## **3. Catalysts and consensus-builders**

Peacebuilding has two functions, which need to operate in tandem: that of being a catalyst and that of being a consensus-builder

### **a. Catalysts**

Peacebuilders can act as catalysts in gaining the trust of the principals (i.e. the key actors) and helping to create channels for dialogue in the pre-negotiation phase, continuing to help maintain the channel for communications informally while negotiations are taking place, and then acting to defuse tensions and helping to repair breakdowns of trust in the implementation of the settlement.

The catalysts need to suggest to the principals ways of dealing with sticking points that might otherwise impede negotiations occur, thus opening the

door for the first steps towards the respective parties coming to the negotiating table.

No specific endorsement can be or should be sought from the principals at this time, for the catalysts merely desire to sow seeds for the future; and the process mustn't bear too closely the particular imprimatur of any of the parties involved. It needs to be an outcome that all can endorse, or at least concede.

#### **b. Consensus-builders**

At the same time, and in parallel, peacebuilders can help to develop and disseminate a common framework for peace as a point of reference to transcend particular party demands, and as a way of suggesting a just basis on which diverse and conflicting concerns can be resolved, and this can be available to the parties during the negotiation process, and in the implementation can contribute to the building-up of an ethos transcending racial, class or ideological differences.

The aim of consensus-builders during the pre-negotiation phase needs to be twofold.

On the one hand, they are helping to create a climate, through a groundswell of public opinion, both white and black, so that there can be a basis on which negotiations between, or among, the principals can take place.

At the same time, they are setting in motion a public debate on the issues, with implications for, and contributions from, the principals, so that when negotiations do take place, there will be a general acceptance in the public mind, about the sort of outcome there needs to be.

Above all, the concept that any government must rule under the law within an accepted framework of values needs to be well established.

#### **c. The two functions together**

Thus, the two functions need to operate in tandem: while public opinion is being nurtured and educated, the principal actors, both inside and outside the country, need to be contacted by the catalysts to gain their acquiescence for the process to take place.

A virtuous cycle of confidence-building needs to be set in train. The restoration of right relationships is the only basis on which peace can be established. Peace in turn is the basis from which all other objectives can be achieved. To restore relationships, there needs to be a process of forgiveness, a relational process that involves a transaction between two or more parties (be they individuals, communities, or national groups).

#### **4. The three tracks of peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding can take place along different ‘tracks’.<sup>36</sup> For this discussion, these will be distinguished from one another, but they are not mutually exclusive, can involve many of the same participants, and can reinforce one another. However, for them to be most effective, they must be clearly distinguished:

##### **a. Track One**

High-level facilitation, which moves towards formal mediation. This involves those in positions of top leadership or those who bear a brief on their behalf. This of necessity operates confidentially or even secretly while in process, but can also be high profile, or become so once the results are announced, or should there be a leak, and therefore still liable to be influenced by public reaction, and pressures from the different constituencies. Typically, Track One addresses the immediate steps required to be put into place for a peace settlement.

##### **b. Track Two**

This concerns intermediate-level facilitation, operating on a low-profile basis in conducted among persons with middle-range leadership, with the influence which reaches both the high-profile and high-level policy-makers, as well as the grassroots. Typically, Track Two initiatives are sustained and global in their coverage and middle-distance in their focus, i.e. they systematically cover the spectrum of national politics, rather than being a single issue.

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<sup>36</sup> The terms ‘Track One’ and ‘Track Two’ were coined by Joseph Montville (‘Foreign Policy According to Freud’ in Montville & Davidson, *Foreign Policy*, 1981). The term ‘Track Three’ is my own, but also relates to the three levels identified by John Paul Lederach (*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington D.C.: United Institute of Peace, 1997): 38-55. I have not followed the nine tracks identified by Louise Diamond and J. McDonald (*Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*. Washington, D.C.: Kumarian Press, 1996).

While Track Two initiatives reflect communal concerns, they do so not to achieve an immediate resolution of the conflict (as in Track One) but rather to work out ways in which these can be accommodated and taken into account in the middle- to long-term.

**c. Track Three**

This addresses a situation of conflict either at a sub-national level – a region or locality, or conflict arising out of a specific issue or situation and involving grassroots leadership. Unlike a Track Three process, these are not comprehensive and tend to take the form of local or issue-specific dialogues. Because they are carried out at a communal level, the secrecy of Track One, or indeed the confidentiality of Track Three is difficult to sustain. They may tend to take the form of facilitated dialogues rather than that of the mediated negotiation of Track One or the facilitated peacebuilding of Track Two.

It is ‘Track Two’ which we are exploring in this paper.

**5. Peacebuilding through the phases of negotiation**

There are three phases through which negotiation passes and in which a Track Two peacebuilding process has a role.

**a. The pre-negotiation phase**

As has been described above, there are two parallel, and mutually supportive, elements of the peace-making process in the pre-negotiation phase, namely consensus-building, the exercise of developing and disseminating a common framework that can be accepted as right by all the parties. On the other hand, there is the catalytic process of consultation confidentially so that contacts are established across the political divides, and the agreement of the principals that this process should be continued is obtained.

(i) The formulation and development of a common framework for peace

A framework of principles needs to be developed and disseminated both in churches and in the communities to form a consensus about the structures of a future dispensation along lines on which all can agree. The framework needs to be based on values that bridge the party-political divides, and yet

must be specific enough to provide a concrete basis for a new and just dispensation.

This involves setting in motion a public debate on the issues, with implications for, and contributions from, the principals, so that when negotiations do take place, there will be a general acceptance in the public mind about the sort of outcome there needs to be.

(ii) Pre-negotiation confidence-building and the creation of ‘space’

The catalysts need to gain the trust of all the principal actors as one guided by an agenda that is not itself determined by the existing political dynamic, but which takes its bearings most fundamentally from a concern for the basic principles of justice itself. They must listen attentively to all disputants, showing concern to each of them equally.

During the first stages of contact, they must establish their bona fides with the principals as they come to recognise their commitment to truth, peace, and justice in their relationship. Their next step will be to suggest ways forward that will accommodate their respective concerns in a just manner. Should these terms not be found acceptable, they must return to their first principles and then work out in consultation with all the parties concerned how an alternative accommodation might develop.

**b. The role of peacebuilders in the negotiation phase**

As in the pre-negotiation phase, the peacebuilders have a parallel role during the actual conduct of negotiations. They need to have available the common framework that they have been disseminating in the pre-negotiation phase, but at the same time, need to be in touch with the principles behind the scenes to help act as informal channels of communication, and to be willing to offer ideas and suggestions in an informal way to the respective principals, even if it runs the risk of rejection and even hostility.

Unlike the principals, the peacemakers are not bound by a constituency, only by the bounds of truth and integrity and the ever-constant search for peace. As such, there is a freedom of action motivated by a universal concern, on a non-partisan basis.

(i) Putting a common framework at the disposal of the principals

Any set of proposals put forward by one will almost inevitably be denounced and pilloried by the others: either because it is slanted too much (despite whatever disclaimers may be made) to the interests of one particular constituency at the expense of others; or the constituency concerned needs to rally its constituency to demonstrate its political power vis a vis the others, and the simplest and most effective way to do this is to attack or pillory the ‘enemy’.

The consensus-builders, from the work they have done in the pre-negotiation phase, now have a set of ideas to offer to the principals, which yet does not bear the imprimatur of any one of them, and thus can be used as the common basis of discussion. The advantage of such a framework is that in accepting it, neither, or none, of the principals, will have to ‘climb down’ to the others, but can find ways to work together with their former opponents for the common good.

(ii) Acting as an informal catalyst during the negotiating process:

During negotiations, stalemates and misunderstandings arise. The catalysts, as independent agencies trusted by all the principals, can work informally behind the scenes to help, perhaps on a shuttle basis, to clarify misunderstandings, and to suggest creative ways around stalemates, taking the risk of failure upon themselves without prejudice to the bargaining positions of the respective principals.

**c. The role of peacebuilders during the implementation of the settlement**

The role of peacebuilders does not end with the agreement on a settlement. They need to continue to uphold and secure the settlement in both a public and a private way.

(i) Helping to sustain the common ethos and moral framework

The framework developed in the pre-negotiation phase, which helped to inform the principals in coming to a settlement, must continue to be the basis on which the consensus necessary to sustain the process can be built. As this process continues, so must the process of public understanding and debate, so that a constant sense of living under the protection of law within a constitutional order is engendered in the public consciousness.

The framework must also be the basis for developing a proper system of checks and balances in all areas of life so that the functions of all institutions: state, church, and family, as well as all voluntary associations can function according to their proper role. The ‘covenant’— that is, the authority under which the government is placed in power — needs always to be upheld, so that all breaches of the constitution can be remedied in the courts.

(ii) Defusing tensions and misunderstandings

The implementation phase is likely to be full of difficulties and misunderstandings, and the catalysts need to be on hand to help clarify these and build a climate of general confidence and goodwill, while at the same time drawing attention to those areas where the principles of the settlement have been moved away from, or where further and subsidiary settlements need to be reached between conflicting parties.

## **6. Conclusion**

The perspective of peacebuilding is one of well-informed hope. Without the possibility of seeing beyond the immediate struggle for power and position, and beyond the self-perpetuating cycle of injury and revenge, the process of healing and restoration cannot take place. The substance of what is being worked towards needs also to be based on values beyond the calculus of immediate self-interest. The irony, indeed, the divine irony in this, is that having abandoned the struggle for ascendancy at the cost of others, the true basis for prosperity in concrete terms is laid. The peace that is given us through the rule of Christ is, thus, the true foundation for the future.



# A Relational Approach to Peacebuilding in the Korean Peninsula

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## Abstract

For North and South Korea to come together in partnership or as one nation will require a shared vision acceptable to both societies. Prioritizing harmony and proximity in personal and organizational relationships across society and the economy can provide a framework that is in keeping with Korea's social traditions, as well as with biblical social design. A "Track Two" process for building consensus based on a relational framework through a program of consultations contributed to ending apartheid in South Africa and ending civil war in Sudan. Such an approach could now be applied in the Korean Peninsula.

## Keywords

relationships, relational society, Track 2 diplomacy, Korean Peninsula

Whatever happens in the immediate future, if North and South Korea are ever to come together again as one nation, they will need a shared ideological framework and a roadmap to restore harmony between the families and communities that have been divided for so long. Hence there is a need to explore a shared vision that would be acceptable to both North and South Korean societies. In what follows, we argue for a relational understanding of both individual well-being and public policy. This approach

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has strong resonance with the cultural and political history of the Korean Peninsula, with its deep roots in Confucian teaching, and more recently with the influence of the Christian worldview.

Given the current state of inter-Korean relations, the immediate goal is to reduce tensions and misunderstandings through opening constructive dialogue. It is to be hoped that this step may move on to agreement on a range of issues on which both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) may agree to cooperate; joint initiatives will help to increase trust.

Much will depend, of course, on what the major powers with an interest in the region decide to do in the months and years ahead. There can be little doubt, however, that unity of understanding and purpose among all those living on the Korean Peninsula will serve the interests of long-term peace and social harmony, which is the primary goal of any peacebuilding process, beyond the mere securing of an end to the fear of war.

This article will outline a confidence-building approach as a contribution to the resolution of the long-running conflict between North and South Korea. It is envisaged that this initiative will take place over several years through an NGO-sponsored series of consultations covering many sectors of public life. The team at Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives (RPI) used a similar "Track Two" methodology in the period leading up to the end of white rule in South Africa and also to help to resolve conflict between North and South Sudan in the period leading up to the 2005 Naivasha Agreement.<sup>1</sup>

## **The starting point: Identifying new foundations**

Our starting point in identifying new foundations is the potential of a relational approach to both the framework of public policy in the Korean Peninsula and the process by which this framework is considered and refined. The relational approach described here has wide appeal to those of all religions who recognize that relationships are key not only to people's personal identity but to the building of peace between nations and ethnic groups. Arguably, this approach is likely to have particular appeal to Koreans, given the importance of relational perspectives and priorities in traditional Korean culture. As will be shown below, we believe that starting with this relational foundation and framework creates the opportunity to define a new set of institutions that have their roots in biblical revelation but that can be shown to have a rationale that is a logical outcome of its relational starting point.

Christians recognize that their faith is profoundly relational. They believe in God as a Trinity of persons in eternal relationship with one another, and they affirm that relationships are basic to the character of the universe in general and to human beings in particular. Righteousness, sin, and covenant are all relational terms. The purpose of the incarnation was for God to relate directly with human beings, so Jesus was given the name "Immanuel" (God with us). Jesus's life was that of a perfect relational person; he redefined poverty, for example, as primarily a relational rather than a financial concern (e.g., see Luke 4:18, along with Luke 5:27-32). The purpose of his death on the cross, the central event in Christian history, together with the resurrection, is

described in both the Old and the New Testaments in the language of forgiveness and reconciliation; it is about the restoration of broken relationships. Jesus says that all Old Testament law and the prophets are summarized by the two great commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor; love is a quality of relationship, not a description of power or wealth.

God is concerned for just relationships and social harmony, not only between individuals but between cities and nations. Resentment and hostility, resulting from history or from actions today, are the antithesis of love. Christ warns that every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined. The consequences of such antagonism are likely to include physical, financial, and emotional hardship, and ultimately violence. However, when peacemakers sow seeds of peace, they harvest righteousness (James 3:18)

Jesus calls peacemakers blessed (Matt. 5:9). Reconciliation between nations, ethnic groups, and individuals is rooted in Christ's work on the cross. More generally, Christians are called to seek and pray for the harmony (*shalom*) of nations (see Jer. 29:7). So, what initiatives might Christians take to build trust between North and South Korea, and between the two Koreas and their powerful neighbors and allies? Surely peace and strong, healthy relationships must be central goals of the Christian agenda, given that relationships are so important in God's eyes.

### **Preconditions for rebuilding relationships of trust**

To analyze trust, or distrust, in the context of public life requires fresh categories and language.<sup>2</sup> Relationships, like clouds, are hard to define and measure. Biblical language speaks much about how close or far people are from God, that is, the degree of relational distance, the converse of which is relational proximity.<sup>3</sup> What can Christians propose to political leaders to reduce relational distance, and how can they constructively help to resolve tensions and build trust between those holding opposite viewpoints?

Three main components of trust are mutual understanding, perceived fairness, and shared goals and values:

1. *Mutual understanding* can be developed best through face-to-face dialogue; communication is far richer when the parties are in the same room. Trust also requires sustained contact, or continuity, with those who hold the opposite point of view so as to understand the rationale of the other side's position. Trust is strengthened by not assuming the worst of the other's intentions (see 1 Cor. 13:7).
2. *Perceived fairness*—mutual respect, or “parity”—requires recognition that all are made in the image of God, a commitment to fairness in the distribution of risk and reward, and fairness in the process of discussion or negotiation.
3. *Shared goals and values* involve a joint commitment to mutually beneficial outcomes. They are often a key factor in the search for peace and can require leaders to agree to both the underlying principles at stake and how these impact

their constituencies. In the context of the Korean conflict, shared goals and values need to arise from an alternative ideology and societal model that stands apart from the individualism that lies at the heart of capitalism, and from the collectivism of Communism. Relational thinking, or “Relationism,” with its starting point in relationships rather than in either the individual or the collective as the respective starting points, provides an alternative.

This understanding of the main components of trust, together with the institutional norms described below, mean that a normative element is introduced into discussion of relationships.

### **The relational approach to peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding can take place along several different “tracks.”<sup>4</sup> For this discussion these tracks will be distinguished from one another, but they are not mutually exclusive; they can involve many of the same participants and can reinforce one another. For them to be most effective, however, it is important that they be clearly distinguished.

*Track One* concerns the formal negotiation process and directly involves those in positions of top leadership or those who bear a brief on their behalf, as well as any other official actors, whether states or intergovernmental organizations. Prior to the formal negotiation process there may be a more informal, often secret, prenegotiation phase (often called Track One and a Half). Typically, Track One addresses the immediate steps required to be put into place for a peace settlement, as well as the substance of the constitutional and other arrangements that need to be put in place as agreed by all the parties, both domestic and international.

*Track Two* concerns intermediate-level facilitation, operates on a low-profile basis, and is conducted among persons in positions of significant responsibility. These participants need to have influence that reaches both to the high-level policy-makers and to the grass roots. Typically, Track Two initiatives are wide-ranging in their coverage and middle-distance in their focus; that is, they cover the spectrum of national politics and concern the range of possible futures, not holding fast to any particular constitutional model or to any specific social or economic outcomes. They aim to build trust to secure a sustainable basis for the common good. Track Two initiatives do not seek to achieve an immediate resolution of the conflict (as in Track One), but rather to create a shared vision for the future.

*Track Three* processes tend to have a local or issue-specific focus. Because they are carried out at a communal level, the secrecy of Track One and the confidentiality of Track Two are difficult to sustain. They tend to take the form of dialogue rather than that of the mediated negotiation of Track One or the facilitated consultation process of Track Two.

### **Experience in South Africa and Sudan**

The RPI team now working to build peace in the Korean Peninsula previously worked to create peace in South Africa in the period leading up to the end of

apartheid (i.e., 1987–94). Although confidential at the time, the process in South Africa was well documented, and its significance has subsequently begun to be recognized.<sup>5</sup>

The second arena of RPI work was in Rwanda from 1994 to 1999, following the genocide there. RPI's third peacebuilding initiative, from 1999 to 2004, involved a series of consultations between the major political parties, ethnic groups, and regions in North and South Sudan.

In both South Africa and Sudan, the process was similar. There were a series of consultations as part of a Track Two process that built up confidence across the divides and so helped to undergird the initially secret Track One process, which led onto formal negotiations. These consultations also helped to provide a framework for the various Track Three processes that were undertaken later.

The key features of the consultation process employed in both South Africa (between the ANC, the white establishment, and the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party) and in Sudan (among the various national, regional, and ethnic groups) may be described as follows:

1. The consultations were not a negotiation but an *exploration and creation of a possible shared vision* for the parties to the conflict. The participants were thus not official representatives but attended in their *personal capacity*.
2. In both the South Africa and Sudan peacebuilding processes, the ten or so consultations covered economic, social, and political issues and *took place over several years*.
3. In addition to the participants from the country concerned, the consultations were *attended by international interlocutors*, not as formal representatives but as informal channels to the key international actors.
4. For each different topic, *subject experts* (whether academics, professionals, or from within government departments) attended in their personal capacities, and from the international community. Papers were commissioned by the convening organization's Secretariat to address key issues identified by the participants and international interlocutors to help the parties move toward consensus.<sup>6</sup>

## **Relational design for society**

The biblical foundation for proposing a model for both society and the economy is to understand biblical law as a social paradigm, as argued by Christopher Wright.<sup>7</sup> The approach is developed and expanded in two important books: *Jubilee Manifesto* and *God, Justice, and Society*.<sup>8</sup> We can understand biblical law, whatever its origins, as an alternative legal solution to the ideas of Greece, Rome, and other traditions, for the great issues of political economy. Arguably, biblical law may be regarded as the design of a relational God for a relational society and a relational economy—provided by God to his people as they move into the promised land to establish themselves for the first time as a political entity.

The study of the biblical paradigm, within a relational framework as set out above, points to a society that is very different from those created by either capitalism or socialism. Five of the key differences may be highlighted as follows:

### ***Government***

It is vital that distant government institutions do not take over too many of the functions that can be carried out at a more local level. These local responsibilities include creation of employment opportunities, provision of housing, education and health care, and resolving disputes that occur within the community. At the same time, the head of state, with other central institutions, is a focus of unity for the nation as a whole.

### ***Time priorities***

It is not possible to develop committed and long-term relationships between individuals within families and communities unless priority is given to investment of time in those relationships and, in a God-fearing community, with God himself. The Sabbath enables everyone to be able to spend time together on one day each week.

### ***Family and roots***

In the biblical social paradigm, family is not defined as the nuclear family, or household, as in Western social thinking, but as an extended family that stretches across generations. This biblical understanding, which is closer to a traditional Korean understanding of family, has marriage at its heart. This larger social unit provides a more effective welfare group than the household to support vulnerable individuals, and it typically can provide better care for the elderly when they are no longer able to look after themselves. Giving extended family an economic role is vital to its cohesion in the long term.

### ***Finance***

The lack of necessary contact between the providers and users of capital in a modern society, whether in the context of debt or through institutions of the modern corporation and capital markets, creates relational distance.<sup>9</sup> Money, however, should act as a form of social glue, helping people get to know one another across the many kinds of relations present in society.

### ***Property***

An essential feature of a “fair society” in biblical thinking is that every household, as part of an extended family, owns a home and, where possible, has access to a piece of land on which it can grow crops for home consumption and even for sale. The biblical

economic model anticipates free trade in goods and services (capital, labor, and land) but aims to constrain inequalities of income and wealth through laws governing use of capital and ownership of property

## **Toward a relational Korean Peninsula**

Relational thinking has an impact across many areas of social, political, and economic life. It might be applied to the Korean context in the following areas:

1. The goal and meaning of *development* as not being exclusively about economic growth but also about the quality of relationships at the level of families and communities, and across society.
2. The definition of *poverty* not just as a financial state but also as a relational condition, so that society strives to ensure that people are not marginalized, excluded, or lonely.
3. *Human rights* redefined in relational terms, so that the impact of decisions based on these rights considers all parties to the relationships affected by the granting or application of a human right.
4. *Personal identity* not defined by reference only to how individuals view themselves but in the context of their relationships to their families and communities.
5. *Companies* to have not just a financial goal, maximizing returns to those who provide capital, but also a social purpose so that they are seen to serve the public good. Also, companies are obliged to assess annually the quality of relationships with their stakeholders, including their employees, and have a dialogue with them that is reported as part of their annual report and accounts.<sup>10</sup>
6. *Schools* no longer based on competitive individualism, where each student is trying to outperform the others, but rather based on a vision of a relational society where cooperation is rewarded and where relational skills, not just technical skills, are measured.
7. *Finance* organized to build relationships between providers and users of capital by ensuring contact between them after the initial transfer of funds, and a shared interest in how successfully the funds are applied for the achievement of both relational and economic ends.
8. *Health care* to have an emphasis on prevention through public health initiatives, as well as the use of modern medicine to help heal those who are sick, and the reintegration of health care into care for the whole person within a family and community context.
9. *Economic growth strategy* to avoid borrowing by governments, companies, and individuals to ensure absence of long-term constraints on the economy's performance. This strategy requires (1) a shared-equity approach to home ownership, (2) commitment to enabling families and communities to provide social care so that these responsibilities fall as little as possible on the state, and (3) new ways to involve shareholders in the companies that they help to fund.

## **Relevance of relational design for the Korean Peninsula**

Korea has suffered conflict as the result of great power rivalry across the peninsula throughout its history, but especially in the twentieth century. The current conflict on the peninsula remains unresolved and indeed threatens to be the source of a new international conflagration, with the possibility of destruction on a scale to match or even exceed the worst horrors of the twentieth century, with enormous cost to its neighbors, as well as to the wider international community.

Despite many families having members on both sides of the 38th Parallel, and despite many attempts at *détente*, relations between North and South have remained polarized and often tense. However, the shared language and long history of Korean culture offers hope that the future lies in unity rather than division. What is critically needed is an agreed ideological foundation and framework for political economy that can enable all parties to come together around a shared vision for the future of the peninsula.

It should not be assumed that in the future the North will dominate because of its nuclear capability or that the South will dominate because of its larger industrial and economic base. Although the population of the South is nearly double that of the North and although its GDP, as measured using the usual international measures, is many times that of the North, the identity of the North is distinctive and cannot easily be absorbed into the South, nor the South into the North.

What needs to be worked toward is a true partnership, with transformation of the political economy of both societies, through refocusing on the importance of relationships in families, communities, companies, schools, and across society. This approach draws on the roots of both Confucian thinking, which is deeply rooted in Korean culture, and Christian priorities. The latter avoids the culture of Confucian hierarchy, which can be an impediment to the ability of both sides to come to the table as equals.

If it is true that the DPRK in the North will never accept willingly the capitalism of the ROK in the South, and that the ROK will never accept willingly the socialism of the DPRK, some alternative framework for economic and social life needs to be proposed as an option that both countries will find acceptable.

In the context of the Korean conflict, shared goals and values will require an alternative ideology that stands apart from the individualism lying at the heart of capitalism, and apart from the collectivism of Communism. Relational thinking, or “Relationism,” with its starting point in relationships rather than the individual or the collective, provides such an alternative.

The rapid economic expansion and sophisticated technological development of the ROK have taken place not without strain on the social fabric, involving loosening of family ties and the rise of a consumerist culture. The DPRK has experienced the problem of how to balance the costs of political independence with the need to develop its economic base and provide the material needs of its people. There is also the extensive diaspora of Korean people who need to be included in any discussions regarding the future of the peninsula.

There are also issues in how Korea is to relate to its immediate neighbors, which are far from straightforward in the case of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. Regarding Japan, there is the unresolved question of reconciliation with Korea, while difficulties arise from the United States having a continuing military presence in the ROK. It is in the best interest of all these countries that Korea as a whole is put on a long-term and peaceful course of development.

Given the deep distrust that exists, despite the limited success of the Geneva agreement of 1964, this is not an objective that can foreseeably be achieved at an intergovernmental level. All attempts at do so within the limited boundaries set by the nuclear weapons issue have continued to break down, notably in the framework of the six-party talks. More space needs to be created at the level of civil society for free and constructive interaction. However, without a common conception of the principles and values that would underpin a future social and economic order, this dialogue will not be possible.

What needs to be worked toward is true partnership through refocusing both the economy and the culture, of both North and South Korea, on the central importance of Relational values.

## Notes

1. Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives (RPI) is a not-for-profit Swiss association established in the Canton of Geneva ([relationalpeacebuilding.org](http://relationalpeacebuilding.org)). RPI is a member of the Relational Thinking Network ([relationalthinking.net](http://relationalthinking.net)), whose other members include the Relational Schools Project ([relationalschools.org](http://relationalschools.org)), the Relationships Foundation ([www.relationshipsfoundation.org](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org)), and Relational Analytics ([www.relational-analytics.com](http://www.relational-analytics.com)).
2. For greater detail, see John Ashcroft, Roy Childs, Alison Myers, and Michael Schluter, *The Relational Lens: Understanding, Measuring, and Managing Stakeholder Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017).
3. For a biblical analysis of relational proximity, see Guy Brandon, "Relational Proximity: A Biblical Framework," *Jubilee Centre: Biblical Thinking for Public Life*, [www.jubilee-centre.org/relational-proximity-biblical-perspective](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/relational-proximity-biblical-perspective).
4. The terms "Track One" and "Track Two" were coined by William D. Davidson and Joseph V. Montville ("Foreign Policy according to Freud," *Foreign Policy* 45 [1981–82]: 145–57). The term "Track Three," used here in a specific sense, also relates to the three levels identified by John Paul Lederach (*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* [Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997], 38–55).
5. Willie Esterhuyse, *Endgame: Secret Talks and the End of Apartheid* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 115–17, 138–39, 210, 243; Jeremy Ive, "Peacebuilding and the Ending of Apartheid," *Cambridge Papers* 23, no. 2 (June 2014).
6. See Jeremy Ive, "A History of the Newick Park Initiative (NPI) and Its Contribution to Building Peace in South Africa, 1986–1994," *Jubilee Centre: Biblical Thinking for Public Life*, July 2014, [www.jubilee-centre.org/history-newick-park-initiative-jeremy-ive](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/history-newick-park-initiative-jeremy-ive).
7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985).
8. Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda, and Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005); Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

9. Jonathan Rushworth and Michael Schluter, *Transforming Capitalism from Within: A Relational Approach to the Purpose, Performance, and Assessment of Companies* (Cambridge: Relationships Global, 2011), [www.relationshipsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Transforming\\_Capitalism\\_Report.pdf](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Transforming_Capitalism_Report.pdf).
10. Changes in corporate governance through so-called integrated reporting are highlighting the importance of stakeholders, rather than simply shareholders, in corporate reporting. Not only financial capital is to be measured, but also human capital, intellectual capital, environmental capital, and relational capital.

### Author biographies



Michael Schluter, a British citizen, lives in Cambridge and is currently executive director of Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives.



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GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

GARY MCMURRAY

*Toil and Troubles: The Bubbling Cauldron*

**Toil and Troubles: The Bubbling Cauldron**  
**Rev Gary McMurray**  
**June 2022**

Place names in Northern Ireland communicate more than just the location - they often convey not just geography, but also topography. While the Irish language is contested in our part of the world, even those who most strongly oppose it find themselves speaking it - or at least an anglicised version of it - when they mention where they're from, or where they're going. So my hometown, Dromore, is the anglicised form of *Droim Mór* - meaning, great ridge. Nearby, my in-laws live in Dromara, *Droim mBearach*, which means ridge of heifers! In many places throughout Northern Ireland, and indeed the whole island of Ireland, topography has been passed down into the geography of our place names.

That's particularly the case in my present incumbency. Officially, our village has two names. Most often, it's known as Richhill, which isn't a comment on how wealthy the residents of the village are - actually, it's a contraction of the name of the family who planted the village in the Ulster Plantation of 1610: Richardson's Hill. Richhill has another name, an older name: *Log an Choire* (Legacorry). While the planters focused on the defensive high ground offered by the hill, Legacorry means '*the hollow of the cauldron.*'

The original cauldron that gave its name to the townland and village is now long gone, but nevertheless it seems to me that the image of a cauldron is a fitting metaphor for where we find ourselves in Northern Ireland in 2022. With some poetic licence in the appropriating of the Scottish play, Northern Ireland, through its toil and troubles, is the bubbling cauldron. In this paper, I seek to explore the metaphor of the bubbling cauldron, and ask how we can minister in and to a divided community.

#### The Bubbling Cauldron: Its Contents

The weird sisters in Macbeth provide the recipe for one of their charms, and all said, it's pretty revolting:

*Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and caldron bubble.  
Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the caldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.*

*Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and caldron bubble.  
Cool it with a baboon's blood,  
Then the charm is firm and good. <sup>1</sup>*

The bubbling cauldron of Northern Ireland has many more horrible contents, which continuously bubble up to the surface. The horrors of 'the Troubles' are constantly with us, in all sorts of ways. Scenes of murder and devastation are sometimes physically marked with monuments; commemorations and remembrance services are held on anniversaries; and stories are passed down, so that victims will never be forgotten - and the actions of 'the other' are raked up.

As a child, I played Top Trumps - a card game where you have to try to beat the other player's card. So if it was sports cars, you tried to guess which particular feature of your car would trump

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<sup>1</sup> Macbeth: IV.i 10-19; 35-38

your opponent's car - speed, engine size, or whatever. In Northern Ireland we have a well-established adult version, which could be called 'whataboutery.' Perhaps others are familiar with whataboutery, but we have it down to a fine art. It happens on Twitter all the time. One murderous incident is remembered, perhaps on the anniversary. Then someone will reply, "Yes, but what about ..." and they will mention another horrific incident perpetrated by the other side. Incidents are recalled by name, with pain on both sides. Bloody Sunday, and Bloody Friday; McGurk's bar, and Narrowwater; Loughinisland and Greysteel, Enniskillen, La Mon, and the Shankill; the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and Warrington – not to mention the many other incidents where individuals or smaller groups were killed or injured. Victimhood can be weaponised as the struggle continues on social media, and the contents of the bubbling cauldron continue.

History is never in the past; the past is always present with us. With so many 'empty chairs at empty tables,' 'there's a grief that can't be spoken; there's a pain goes on and on.'<sup>2</sup> The grief and pain can be found in many homes in Northern Ireland, requiring sensitive pastoral care. In my former parish, I was invited to sit in a living room with a family as they received the Historical Investigations Unit report on the death of their husband, father and grandfather. Jimmy had been the third brother to have been murdered by the IRA, and no one had been arrested let alone convicted. The PSNI<sup>3</sup> Historical Investigations Unit had revisited the original RUC<sup>4</sup> files to follow up on any new lines of enquiry. The officer, delivering the report, said that there was nothing new to tell the family. He knew who had carried out the murder - as did the family - but there wasn't enough evidence for a conviction. Even if the perpetrator had been arrested, tried and convicted, they would be eligible for early release after two years due to the Good Friday Agreement - which they would have served on remand waiting for the trial to commence.

The Graham family are just one of many throughout Northern Ireland and beyond who bear their grief and suffering with quiet endurance. They long for justice, but are unlikely to find it in an earthly courtroom. Yet it's striking that in the midst of so many so-called 'tit-for-tat' killings, that more didn't seek revenge for their wrongs, especially when the killers were neighbours or colleagues, local people known by their victims, and known by the grieving families. Had revenge been more prevalent, the Troubles could have been even worse.

Recently, Her Majesty's Government managed to do something incredibly rare in Northern Ireland: uniting victims' groups and politicians from across the community, all in opposition to the Legacy proposals. The Legacy and Reconciliation Bill, including the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, would see immunity from prosecution in return for information. All of the Northern Irish MPs who take their seats voted against the Bill at its first reading. The aim of the legislation seems to be to stop the prosecution of soldiers, but it removes any opportunity for justice and reduces the likelihood of discovering the truth about what went on in the Troubles.

The contents of the bubbling cauldron remain in place, a broth of horrific incidents and handed-down memories, victimhood and guilt, resentment and whataboutery; and the bubbling cauldron is in danger of bubbling over.

### The Bubbling Cauldron: Bubbling Over

The 10th April 1998 was the day the Prime Minister Tony Blair felt the 'hand of history' upon the shoulders of the negotiating forum that produced the Belfast Agreement, commonly called the Good Friday Agreement. Alongside the dates of the various ceasefires that paved the path to peace, Good Friday 1998 provides a watershed moment when peace seemed possible for the first time in a generation. After thirty years of Troubles, parties from both unionist and nationalist sides of the community had reached an agreement for power-sharing. It was a historic moment, yet from the perspective of the twenty-four years that have passed since then, peace for many

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<sup>2</sup> Empty Chairs at Empty Tables from *Les Misérables*. Lyrics by Alain Boublil & Herbert Kretzmer.

<sup>3</sup> Police Service of Northern Ireland - established 2001

<sup>4</sup> Royal Ulster Constabulary - the police force from 1922 - 2001.

seems as far away as ever, and the cauldron continues to bubble - indeed, threatens to bubble over.

It has ever been thus. The largest single loss of life occurred when the County Tyrone town of Omagh was bombed in August 1998 - after the Agreement. Dissident republican groupings continue to organise and mount attacks, most notably killing the promising young journalist Lyra McKee during rioting on Good Friday 2019. Though small, dissident groupings maintain that they alone are the true republicans, denouncing Sinn Fein for compromising the struggle. Similarly, so-called loyalist paramilitary groups run their communities, engaging in drug-dealing and other forms of criminality. Rather than paramilitaries disappearing, they seem to flourish under community grants and other schemes.

Tensions remain high in many parts of Northern Ireland. Belfast and some other towns continue to have 'peace walls' - walls, fences or gates which separate two opposing communities living closely together. Rather than the walls coming down, the BBC reported in 2018 that 'In fact, there are now more peace walls across Northern Ireland than there were before the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.'<sup>5</sup> Some of these peace walls continue to be the scene of inter-communal rioting - acts of provocation from one side or the other.

Indeed, Neil Jarman and Chris O'Halloran spoke of 'Recreational Rioting'<sup>6</sup> as far back as 2001, and the same patterns continue to be seen. Tensions rise in the summer months especially, around the Eleventh Night bonfires (11th July) and the Twelfth of July parades. Yet even in April of 2021, there was recreational rioting on the streets of Belfast, including a Metro bus being hijacked and burned out in front of St Matthew's Church on the Shankill Road in Belfast. The Rector of the Church, Rev Tracey McRoberts spoke of being out on the street with other clergy the next night as rioting continued.

*"We were just a presence on the street and spoke to people who were spectating," Tracey said. "I didn't think about my own safety at the time. We wanted to show that we were there. We did not speak to those involved in the rioting. You are unlikely to get through to these young people when they are in that frame of mind. Sadly the Church holds little sway with them."*<sup>7</sup>

Her last line seems up to sum up, at least partly, the cause of the cauldron bubbling over. The Church holds little sway for many in our society. Some in the loyalist community who are loyal to Britain and the Queen, see themselves as Protestant but there is little evidence of true Protestantism, of living as a witness for the truth of the gospel. Instead a cultural 'protestantism' has developed, divorced from any kind of religious belief or practice. Similarly, there has been a loss of authority and respect among many raised in the nationalist / republican community for the Catholic Church following clerical abuse and mother-and-baby home scandals across the island of Ireland.

Another element to note in Rev Tracey McRoberts' remarks are that the rioters are young people, mostly teenagers - that is, all born since the Good Friday Agreement. These peace babies aren't reaping the rewards of peace, but rather are being drawn into another generation of low-level recreational rioting, increasing the heat and raising tensions in working-class areas of Belfast.

As the cauldron threatens to bubble over, how do the churches speak into the situation, and make a difference in the local communities? In many parts of Belfast, the traditional parish model has almost completely broken down. Small numbers remain in big old churches that are costly to maintain. New approaches to mission and evangelism are beginning to emerge, in partnership

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<sup>5</sup> 'Will NI's peace walls come down by 2023 to meet 10-year target?' on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43991851> Last accessed 22/06/22.

<sup>6</sup> Jarman, Neil & O'halloran, Chris. (2001). Recreational Rioting: Young People, Interface Areas and Violence. *Child Care in Practice*. 7. 2-16. 10.1080/13575270108413230.

<sup>7</sup> 'Prayers for Peace in north Belfast' on <https://connor.anglican.org/2021/04/12/prayers-for-peace-in-north-belfast/> Last accessed 22/06/22.

with Church Army. One example is the North Belfast Centre of Mission on the Shankill Road.<sup>8</sup> Lead Evangelist, Karen Webb speaks of how, 'We're trying our best to work between the community and the church, which is why our base is called the Connect base.'<sup>9</sup> Perhaps our models of ministry need to move from maintenance to mission, beyond our holy huddles to connect with and change our local communities and reduce the temperature of the bubbling cauldron.

It may be easy for me to look at what's happening in Belfast with despair, and even an element of detachment, living in leafy Richhill, a village in rural County Armagh. Yet even in our settled surroundings, there are tensions and sectarianism below the surface. While our kerbstones may not be painted red, white and blue, the ownership of every field is known and care is taken to ensure that land for sale is kept by one community or the other. Indeed, just down from our Rectory, a new development of twenty houses was being built. Overnight an array of Union flags were erected on the advertising sign, to try to intimidate the Catholic developer out of his investment. Sectarian tension isn't just in the city, but even among us in the sticks.

So far, we have examined the contents of the cauldron, and considered the danger of the cauldron bubbling over. Finally, we turn to the other aspect of the bubbling cauldron we see in Northern Ireland - the intensifying effect.

### The Bubbling Cauldron: The Intensifying Effect

When cooking, the recipes often call for a pan to simmer until the contents are reduced. As the pan simmers, the excess water is evaporated off, leading to the sauce intensifying in flavour. As the metaphorical cauldron of Northern Ireland bubbles, we can see the intensification towards the extremes. Twenty years ago, I was completing my dissertation for my Bachelor of Arts in Politics at Queen's University Belfast. My theme for the dissertation was the rise of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), charting how the smaller, more hardline DUP had developed to almost overtake the traditional, established UUP as the largest unionist party. Shortly after, their rise was completed, and has been unstoppable ever since. Similarly, in the nationalist community, Sinn Fein (SF) have overtaken the Socialist Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as the largest party.

The UUP and SDLP had been the main drivers of the Good Friday Agreement, seen as the moderate parties. Yet in the era of peace post-Agreement, the bubbling cauldron has led to the intensifying of political support for the extreme parties. At times the DUP and SF have worked together, such as when Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness were nicknamed the 'Chuckle Brothers.'<sup>10</sup> Yet on other occasions, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been suspended due to one or other of the parties withdrawing from the mandatory coalition model of government. A three year suspension enforced by SF ended in January 2020, just before the pandemic, but now in June 2022, we are again without an Assembly or Executive due to the withdrawal of the DUP.

It must be noted that while the unionist and nationalist extremes are dominant in their communities, there is at the same time a rising number of 'Others.' These parties designate as neither unionist or nationalist, and see themselves as cross-community, most notably the Alliance Party which became the third largest party in May 2022 with 13.5% of the Assembly election vote. Yet while the 'Others' may signify a growing desire for reconciliation and a movement beyond national-identity based politics, that bloc is disadvantaged when it comes to Stormont's procedures. The First and Deputy First Ministers are allocated to the largest party in each of the two opposing communities; and many votes need cross-community consensus to be passed - with the Others' votes not counting. The very system designed in the Good Friday Agreement to

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<sup>8</sup> 'North Belfast Centre of Mission' on <https://churcharmy.org/mission/north-belfast/> Last accessed 22/06/22.

<sup>9</sup> 'Changing Context: An Interview with Karen Webb' on <https://www.belfastbiblecollege.com/changing-context-an-interview-with-karen-webb> Last accessed 22/06/22.

<sup>10</sup> How Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley forged an unlikely friendship on <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/how-martin-mcguinness-and-ian-paisley-forged-an-unlikely-friendship-35550640.html> Last accessed 22/06/22.

encourage power-sharing through mandatory coalition may now be past its usefulness by rewarding the parties maintaining our divisions.

While there have been many peace gains in many parts of Northern Ireland, the bubbling cauldron continues to intensify our politics. Reconciliation seems as unlikely as ever, especially with the whataboutery and radicalisation of younger generations as already mentioned. And that's not even considering the impact of the B word: Brexit. Time and space prevent me from diving into the ocean of Brexit or the Irish Sea border brought about by the Northern Ireland Protocol. Sufficient to say that the issue is fought along sectarian lines, and has led to the failure of Stormont to elect a Speaker, let alone a new Executive.

Amidst our toil and troubles, the cauldron continues to bubble with its contents being stirred up; the danger of bubbling over; and the intensifying effect of pushing our society to its extremes. How can we minister in and to a divided community? It is only through the love of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit that we can be changed. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to proclaim reconciliation - with God, and with each other. We long for people in Northern Ireland to know the Lord Jesus, to be made new people, by being reconciled to God.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one day the bubbling cauldron of Northern Ireland will have cooled down and disappeared, just as the cauldron that gave its name to Legacorry - *the hollow of the cauldron* - has long since gone.

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

## **Synopsis of Toil and Troubles: The Bubbling Cauldron**

Using the metaphor of a bubbling cauldron, the current political landscape of Northern Ireland is discussed with the aim of considering how we can minister in and to a divided community. Twenty-four years since the Good Friday Agreement, the past is with us in the present and the cauldron is in danger of bubbling over, while the intensity of emotion and political identity increases.

GOD: SOME CONVERSATIONS 4-14 JULY 2022

DAVID NIXON

*Grumpy Theology: what is it and why do we need it now?*

Grumpy Theology is a subset of general grumpiness, grumpy old men, grumpy old women – we're just feeling grumpy. Perhaps it's age, temperament, physical stuff, we're just more tired; but things like adults riding bikes or electric scooters on the pavement, slow or non-existent service in shops, dodging zombie phone addicts as we enjoy a walk, and the ubiquitous "you guys", these things just get to us, and we're grumpy, and actually quite enjoy being grumpy.

Now it has to be said that Covid has put this into perspective. This kind of grumpiness feels almost a privilege, a 'first world problem', akin to complaints about lack of holidays abroad, while we have read news of nursing homes reduced to mortuaries, the disproportionate numbers of BAME health workers who have died, and the paucity of vaccines available for poorer countries. And there might even have been a period when we longed for an excuse to wax lyrical about former irritations.

But as Covid lessens, those old foes seem to be re-asserting themselves, perhaps even with a renewed vigour, as our patience has been worn thin by lockdowns and other restrictions, and as the general and genuine community spirit of the last two years wanes, not least with the evidence of parties for some, but not for all.

Those of us who go to Church, or even are or have been 'employed' by the Church are in a very special set of grumpiness. We're Christian grumps, and when we get beyond the desire to shout aloud our grumpiness (which we almost never do because we're polite Anglicans, and if ordained worried about the Clergy Discipline Measure), and actually give some time to reflection, then what we do is Grumpy Theology. There's always been moaning about the Church, but perhaps what we're faced with now is a bit different. There is a plethora of 'initiatives', with consequent feelings of guilt, when we can't or don't engage them all, almost like that grey cloud of depression. This stuff (a good word because it echoes with muddle and constipation) seems to be based on inadequate theology or no theology at all, simply on what might 'work', though quite what that means is kept (deliberately?) vague. Decisions are made by bad process or no process, with an opacity worthy of an Iron

Curtain regime. And behind all this lurking are questions of identity or non-identity, and not existing at all, which are articulated a little now, but not enough.

The effects of Covid on the Church of England have been multiple (see Nixon 2021), but one of them has been to give a green light to those who wish to see substantial change to the way parishes are organised, anchored into the demonstrable and substantial drop in voluntary giving. The inevitable reaction to this has been taken up in the *Save the Parish* movement, and the 'encouraged' retirement of the Bishop of Winchester, examples perhaps of grumpiness writ large. But even when the outcomes have been less extreme, new policies still tend toward the same weaknesses, with a bizarre mix of panic and institutional inertia. Again, when we stop to think, we shift merely grumpy to grumpy theology.

We also notice a gap between the experience of life and the visible practice and doctrine of the Church, and sometimes of Christians themselves, which leads to a kind of ideological strait jacket, a failure of creativity and imagination, replaced by a thin unreality, and a distinct sense of humour failure, which is rather worthy and puffed, failing to recognise the absurd or ridiculous. So we're grumpy, and perhaps it's our own humour which fails too.

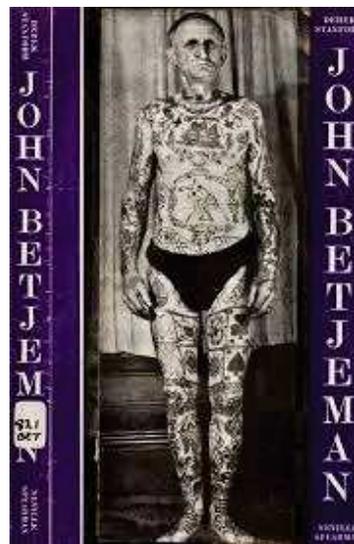
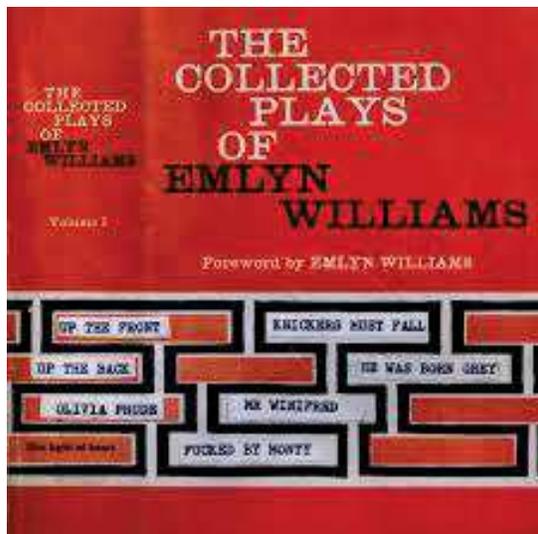
The frame of covid, combined with that of the war in Ukraine, does pose a very serious counter question: is this just self-indulgence, a solipsistic theological version of the beautiful youth Narcissus gazing into the Christian pool? That is the accusation always addressed to autobiographical work, or in a more contemporary mode to autoethnography; and it is quite easy to slip into the water, as it were. Critics of this kind will need however to respond to Augustine with his *Confessions*, to Karl Barth with his childhood reminiscences of hymnody (*Church Dogmatics* IV.2), and to Jürgen Moltmann (*Experiences of Theology*), who begins several chapters with personal experience. He recognises that 'readers of a book want to know not only what the author has to say, but also how he or she arrived at it, and why they put it as they do' (Moltmann 2000: xix).

At its best, autoethnography is construed as 'a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739); it is also particularly suitable for exploring vulnerabilities of body, mind and spirit (Muncey 2006). An example of theological

autoethnography is Whitlock's account of her spiritual journey as a Christian lesbian teacher in the fundamentalist south of the US, which she describes as 'mapping the soul in search for self' (Whitlock 2007: 111). So with some suitable intertwining of theory and cultural reflection, personal experience can avoid those traps.

And because we're grumpy, we allow ourselves a modicum of exaggeration and caricature too; while in reflexive mood, we also admit to it.

So what can we do beyond being grumpy together, in another silo of miscomprehension? We can try some transgressive practice like a latter-day Orton and Halliwell, defacing library books. John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton the playwright describes how over nearly three years starting in 1959, the pair would borrow books from Islington public library and alter the covers with insertions which were humorous, obscene, childish(?), and mildly scatological: for example *The Collected Plays of Emlyn Williams* with 'titles' like *Up the Front*, *Up the Back* pasted on the cover; a heavily tattooed man in swimming trunks to illustrate John Betjeman's poetry. Orton also typed his own synopses of plots on the inside of dust jackets. The pair would wait in the library and watch reactions to their creative talents. They were eventually caught and tried in 1962, each receiving a six month prison sentence and a fine.



Thanks to the joys of word processing, those same alterations are possible without any illegality, probably not even of copyright breach. One proposal therefore is to find classical pictures of Christian stories and adapt them with a caption or a new title, or re-work twee children's pictures of the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' variety. This also reflects the contemporary popularity of picture books or graphic novels, the development of Ladybird books as adult satire (e.g. *Five on Brexit Island*), and the interest in Japanese manga. I'd like to raise here issues of power and voice, to read and hear the Bible differently, which includes 'being read' differently by the Bible, to engage in a postmodern irony and playfulness while commenting on contemporary situations.

A second proposal is to gather together the data from my previous experiential research, most of which have used qualitative methodology, and to develop a new interpretation of liberation theology for the present times. So my published studies on LGBT issues, on homelessness, on urban issues, on Brexit and on Covid provide extended case studies for an expansion of theologies of liberation for the twenty-first century. A turn, or re-turn, to contextual theology is interesting and urgent for the current Church of England: on the one hand, some attention is being paid to the particular situation of dioceses and parishes, but on the other, a national project like Resource Churches is funded generously and centrally, with a theology which seems more over-arching. Additionally, we might need to be alerted to Mind the Gap: between an ecclesiology essentially created out of scripture, tradition, liturgy and so on, and one based more on commercial models – the ability to sell a product at the best price to the greatest number of people, even if that product is religious faith.

Especially since 2020 and the death of George Floyd, 'race' as a further factor should be added (in inverted commas to signify its contested nature), noting and regretting here that my own writing has broadly ignored this dimension. But where the Church of England has been commendable in highlighting its own failures in respect of 'race' and committing to change, it has also managed to decouple a construction of 'race' from the processes of colonisation which gave and gives rise to it – and not just to issues of race. My hope, therefore, would be that a re-analysis of these five areas for case studies would also include the frame of decolonization. The experiment of *Learning to Live in Love and Faith* is significant, less perhaps for its attention to and hope for a resolution of the divisive issues of sexuality and the

Church, and more because the process has emphasized the importance of views and experiences at parish and individual level. What the General Synod does with the feedback will therefore be important in terms of policy and process – which I hope includes theological method. Additionally, it will all be happening while we are meeting at Windsor, with a very real possibility of grumpy theology writ large.

Perhaps this is the moment as well to introduce a caveat. Grumpy theology does not claim to be systematic; it aspires merely to bring together what Forrester (1999: 13) calls ‘theological fragments’, that is data which is ‘illuminating, instructive, or provocative’ in the construction of practical theology in the public realm. Another term used here is that of a bricolage – an assembly of parts which does not necessarily create a coherent whole; rather in the act of fracturing coherence, new insights emerge (Walton 2020). But these fragments or collages do have value and significance. As a snapshot captures a particular moment, a particular geography, a particular facial or bodily disposition which evoke memories and emotion, and in which over a series allows insights and meaning to develop, so such theological fragments offer a provisional interpretation, and resist a dubious claim to universality.

Particularly in respect of developing a contemporary liberation theology, I am keen that the message and medium are consistent, or to use the better counselling term congruent. In other words, there is an authenticity between the ideas and concepts expressed and the vehicle which carries such expression. The competitive and expensive niche market for academic theological publishing may not be best suited for advancing ideas about human liberation and flourishing. For this reason, at least initially, and recognising that the internet has its own market dynamic, I am intending to develop an internet blog to carry these various strands of ideas. My model for this is a cross between the poetry blog of Anthony Wilson and the more theoretical approach of Sara Ahmed. I like Wilson’s discursive use of words, pictures and so on, and his relatively short posts; I like the intensity and challenge of Ahmed who pushes at theory, but find the posts almost too long to read. I hope to discover some happy medium in the actual writing and production; in other words, to be a learner in this area of social media. I have so far registered a domain name and begun the process of establishing a website via WordPress.

Part of the purpose of this essay for me is to expose such ideas and concepts to critical scrutiny, before spending some of my sabbatical time working on this. To that end, I now include one example of Grumpy Theology, for further discussion.

## The Annunciation



Piero della Francesca (1416?-1492)

## ***Commentary***

I'm thinking of Jack Zipes here, who observes the shift from folk tale to fairy tale to Disney story, each stage marking a reduction in the effect of the story, in which other cultural factors are brought into play, especially the support of nuclear families in a late capitalist economy. One way, he imagines, of overturning this drift is to re-write the endings of familiar tales. So the rather meek maiden in the story of Rumpelstiltskin by the Brothers Grimm becomes in the late twentieth century a strident feminist: "You're crazy!" the miller's daughter yelled. "I'll never marry this horrible king. I'd never give my child away" (Zipes 1979: 180). A theological parallel is Samuel Rayan's theology of the Dalit people, which contains a re-working of Matthew 23, the woes Jesus invokes against the Pharisees (Rayan 1992: 135):

Woe to us who have ignored, even distorted Christ's disclosure of the Fatherhood of God, and elaborately buried his vision of the family of God on earth. Woe to us who have solemnly introduced inequalities and master-slave relations where Christ had established a fellowship of brothers and sisters and co-learners, co-workers and comrades. ... Woe to us who close our eyes to the light and weave in the dark theories of pure and impure bloods and births while ignoring the obvious and vital, the values of justice and mercy and equality and freedom and friendship and faithfulness to one another.

By imagining Mary's reluctance to say Yes, evoking the need for Gabriel to persuade her, we are doing a number of things: re-emphasising the agency of Mary, highlighting her potential lack of agency, stressing the contingency of Christian faith. In this era of #MeToo, it seems that Mary's agency is highly significant – in other words, did she really say Yes at all? Did she have any choice? This is the crux of the matter. We are taken immediately back to the Scriptural text, and a re-evaluation of the encounter with Gabriel. REB has her reaction as 'deeply troubled' and 'How can this be? I am still a virgin.' Perhaps her acceptance/acquiescence/assent is more qualified than we have thought before. 'May it be as you have said' might be more like the alternative girl in Rumpelstiltskin: 'You'd better be telling the truth or else'. On this basis, Mary is quite feisty and 'no pushover'. Gabriel's annunciation 'Greetings most favoured one' might also be seen to flatten the hierarchies – indeed in this picture Gabriel seems more on his knees than Mary.

By including the Magnificat in this discussion, and seeing Mary not just as an individual but as a prototype for Israel and by extension the whole of humanity, a further dimension of Yes is explored. There is a Yes to God and God's Yes in return, but there is also a No from God. It is No to those who have exploited, tyrannised and oppressed poor and vulnerable people, the *anawim*, including women. It is No to those whose direction of travel is anti-Kingdom, it is No those who reject the new things that the Kingdom will bring (Gebara and Bingemer 1989: 164-171). It might be that the #MeToo type of approach would be reluctant to adopt Mary as a patron, but she may be more in tune with 'learning to say No' than might be credited.

Where I don't like this picture is Mary's haughty demeanour, and looking more closely at her face and body, she seems more like a matron, the already-mother of Jesus rather than the about-to-be. And, of course, very white, very European. So I might want to add another No: No to assumptions and presumptions of whiteness. Let's use Photobox to tint in an alternative reality.

## Notes & References

Note that this text is based on an earlier pre-pandemic version, developed for critical review at Windsor.

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For other examples of library books defaced by Orton and Halliwell, see

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=orton+defaced+books&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjgpse186HeAhUMJcAKHVWoB8MQsAR6BAqBEAE&biw=1680&bih=904>

For the blogs from Wilson and Ahmed, see

[www.anthonywilsonpoetry.com](http://www.anthonywilsonpoetry.com), [www.feministkilljoys.com](http://www.feministkilljoys.com)