God: Some Conversations

How do you speak about God?

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Assisted Dying: Is it against God's Will?

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Introduction

In our society death is something that normally happens away from the rest of us, in a hospital or hospice. We seldom talk about death either, and many people have never seen a dead person.

A Private Member's Bill on Assisted Dying[1] was laid before the Scottish Parliament (the 'AD Bill') in March 2024. In the AD Bill, the definition of 'terminal illness' is 'an illness with no prospect of recovery, is worsening and at a late stage, and is expected to cause their premature death.' Those 16 years of age or older (an adult in Scotland) who have lived in Scotland for at least one year can make an application for physician assisted dying. Mental ill-health is excluded as a criteria, and the individual must have the mental capacity to make the decision themselves.

In recent times, with a few high-profile individuals lobbying for legal means to assist someone to die at the time and place of their choosing (e.g. Esther Rantzen, diagnosed with terminal lung cancer), along with recently tabled legislation in Scotland, the topic of assisted dying has once again been brought into the nation's consciousness.

Terminology is important in any discussion about assisted dying. The following definitions from the European Association of Palliative Care (Journal of Palliative Medicine 2003: 17: 97-100) are useful: *Euthanasia* is killing on request and is defined as a doctor intentionally killing a person by the administration of drugs, at that person's voluntary and competent request. *Physician-assisted suicide* is defined as a doctor intentionally helping a person

[1] https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/assisted-dying-for-terminally-ill-adults-scotland-bill

to commit suicide by providing drugs for self-administration, at that person's voluntary and competent request.

Physician Assisted Dying is the term used in the Scottish Bill – and is the definition used above as Physician-assisted suicide.

Scripture

Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:7 are cited as texts which affirm that life is sacred and a gift from God. Exodus 20:1-17 (the first mention of the Ten Commandments) includes 'You shall not murder' (verse 13), and subsequently in Deuteronomy 5 too.

Deuteronomy 30 recalls God telling the Israelites to choose life, not death.

Job 30:23, 'I know that you will bring me to death, to the house appointed for all living', and Ecclesiastes 8:8, 'No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind or power over the day of death', are cited as clear statements that God is in sole charge of the length of our lives and it is not for humankind to challenge God's sovereignty.

1 Corinthians 15:25-27, 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet."' Is cited as a clear indication that God has the final say over death.

Romans 5:3, 'And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance,' is cited to argue that humans will experience tribulations and we are to endure them.

Many of these texts when selected and cited in this way imply that God is aware of our suffering and 'allows' some to suffer for a long time and others

for a short time, that there is learning in our suffering, and God's timing is always perfect – even in the matter of someone's death after a lot of suffering.

This way of interpreting Scripture (those cited from Deuteronomy 30 onwards) is through the prism that God is in control of our lives, is sovereign and we must not take action that would subvert God's wishes and plans for each one of us. With this theological view, any attempt to help someone end their life is seen as violating God's will for us, as would someone committing suicide. However, the drawback of this viewpoint is that you can extend it back to argue that any medical intervention to support longevity and good health must also be contrary to God's plans for each one of us, so all medical knowledge and interventions are contrary to God's plans. It could also be seen to imply that any palliative care which reduces suffering and may, as an indirect consequence of providing pain relief, act to shorten a life, is also contrary to God's will. Are we happy to believe that God desires some individuals to suffer a long drawn-out and agonising death, and there is some merit in that suffering? I for one am not happy with that – I cannot conceive of a loving God wishing that for anyone. It also implies that our God-given intelligence should not be used to advance medical interventions to sustain or improve the quality of life.

The Genesis texts and the Ten Commandments do not necessarily imply God's total sovereign nature and control, but do emphasise the sacred nature of human life, that we are made in God's image, and we should treat all other humans with love, compassion and respect. Is it therefore the case that these texts may actually be used to support assisted dying, if we hold each individual in the same gaze of God's love and do not desire them to unnecessarily suffer?

So, is assisting someone to die 'acting as God'? That implies God is in total control of when our lives will end, irrespective of humankind's medical interventions to sustain life.

Societal Issues: Fear of Death

Death is inevitable for all aspects of God's creation; our cells know when to die and have a 'finite lifespan', therefore each person has a finite lifespan. (Doctrine Committee: 2010:18). Humankind is no different from any other aspect of the created order in this respect. It is just that humankind is aware of its mortality. And this knowledge has consequences for human wellbeing.

Jungel (1975:30-31) comments that death is a social fact; that as social beings that relate to and are defined by one another, our personal relationship to our own death impacts on the people we are in relationship with, and vice versa. Death isn't purely a private affair.

Becker (2011: 15) argues that there is a near universal fear of death, a fear caused by humankind's perception that it is one final act that brings everything to a close. This fear can drive many of our behaviours even though we do our best to repress those fears and try not to acknowledge our mortality.

Kirkegaard sees the human as an entity with a level of knowledge and consciousness about life and death which means that humans live, to some extent, in a state of despair (2008:9-14). Kirkegaard believes all humans want to be immortal, and this unfulfillable desire leads to despair; and that the only way to relieve this despair and to live a fulfilling and complete life, is for each individual to be fully grounded in God, where they can have hope and know through their imagination that things without limit are possible in God. (2008:31-45). Kirkegaard uses the concept of a knight of faith (2005:46-49) as a

person who lives a life of faith and has meaning within their relationship with God, that enables the person to live fully in the world whilst maintaining and developing a deep relationship with God on whom all trust can be placed. Kirkegaard's 'knight' has no remaining fear of either life or death and interacts with other people in such a redemptive and salvific way that they enrich others' lives.

As Gawande (2015) powerfully demonstrates, many members of the medical profession are also excellent reinforcers of a fear of death. Many will be so focussed on treating an illness (or illnesses) in a patient, that they give the clear signal that maintaining life, almost irrespective of its quality, is more beneficial than admitting 'defeat' and taking the alternative course of action of prioritising quality of life (the highest priorities are freedom from pain and discomfort and maintaining mental awareness) and preparing for a good death (2015:161). A clinician's thorough and focused treatment of terminal illnesses is indicative of our society's values – no sense is made of a death; it is seldom framed in a wider narrative of an individual's life and the span of years alive has become the goal rather than the quality of that life (Hauerwas: 1990:121-3). (Gawande: 2015:145ff) describes a better way; a clinician who is able to move from their personal narrative of creating their own eternity to subsuming their own (possibly) unconscious motivations and enabling a different style of conversation based on the patient's life story, how the illness fits in to their own narrative, what is important to them and to sensitively approach any issues causing them anxiety.

<u>Societal Issues: Fear of Dying</u>

This fear includes suffering, pain, letting go of independence and control. Mixed in with this fear is the unreasonable expectation that our trust in

medicine and science should result in full recovery of our health (Hauerwas: 1990:35-37) without any significant suffering and pain (Hauerwas: 1990:63). Our society reflects its fears of the process of dying by calling sudden death a merciful release, without suffering.

In our cultural context death is feared, consciously or sub-consciously. There is also a related fear of dying. There are strong and dominant intrinsic, social and cultural forces at work. These make the task of helping someone have a 'good death' challenging. We also see that individuals who are able to prepare for death, to reconcile themselves to friends and family, and put their affairs in order and feel, to some extent, in control of their treatment and chosen journey towards death have 'a good death'.

Good Life and Good Death

Over the last fifty years, the development of the hospice movement has enabled a different sort of narrative about death to be experienced. It has slowly and steadily had an impact on the treatment of, and conversations with patients and enabled good deaths at home or in hospices. The hospice movement has influenced the training of clinicians; more are trained and competent at end-of-life care and take a more holistic approach. However, anecdotal evidence from my own interactions with medical staff and from GP friends, shows that many doctors still retain a strong focus on the illness as the object, not the illness in the context of their patients' lives.

The hospice movement promotes a greater understanding of a good life, a good death, and good grieving. Death Cafes have been initiated, to help people come to terms with their own mortality, and discuss death as a normal

conversation point. These are starting to have a positive impact on society's understanding and approach to death.

I have led several six-session courses using the 'Well Prepared' (Collicutt: 2018) material. Several people have asked me to repeat this course, and it has improved the quality of discussion about death and dying in my congregations, and I hope it has reduced anxieties and fears about death and dying.

Dying Well

The AD Bill comes from a place of care and compassion. I believe we all wish that people should be supported to die well, and that relatives and carers are also supported. From a Christian perspective, dying well is acknowledging that we have always been and will always be in God's hands, and dying is the culmination of our physical life and a time of transformation. Dying well isn't just medical, it is spiritual. Dying at peace with God and the world is a spiritual and pastoral task (involving forgiveness, reconciliation, trust, letting go of anger, freedom from fear, and finding gratitude for their life), not just based on pain relief and a focus on the 'last illness'. This situation requires the holistic clinical approach Gawande recommends, alongside well-resourced hospices, community nurses and others equipped to provide spiritual and pastoral care to accompany people as they approach death.

If there is not an appropriate level of spiritual and pastoral support, conversations with individuals who are terminally ill will naturally focus on when and how one dies, which is most likely to be driven by understandable fears. The Grosvenor Essay No. 9 identifies, what to me is the crux of the issue; that dying well is almost exclusively focussed on an individual's last illness, and even then sometimes only in its very late stages when all attempts to stave off

the inevitable have failed (Doctrine Committee: 2013:25). That is not good for the individuals or those that care for them.

Legislation

Many countries[2] have introduced variations on physician-assisted dying.; many have retained their original restricted definitions of eligibility (age, terminal physical illness, etc.), whereas a few, e.g. the Netherlands and Columbia, have relaxed the criteria, such as reducing age limits and including psychiatric illnesses. There is a real concern that even the introduction of restricted definitions for assisted dying in the UK, or in Scotland, could be relaxed at a later date.

Conclusions

I contend that with a far better system of hospice and related end-of-life care supports systems, the number of people wishing to seek a physician assisted death would be small. It follows that the provision of high-quality palliative and pastoral care is required, should physician assisted dying be legalised. Many hospices rely on charitable donations. Macmillan Cancer Care is also overly reliant on charitable donations. This funding model is not appropriate for a universal 'dying well' strategy.

Jungel and Becker's research support the view that friends and relatives observing a 'good death' are going to be less afraid of death themselves, and it would start to shift societal attitudes.

[2] 12 states in the USA, Canada, Columbia, Ecuador, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Australia, New Zealand. (This Week, May 2024, https://theweek.com/health/assisted-dying-euthanasia-world)

It is recognised that for people of no faith, and whose death is inevitable and reasonably imminent, it would be unreasonable to deny them an avenue to end their lives safely. One phenomenon of this is that once the person can chose to end their life they may consider not following through with that choice.

I believe that churches need to find ways to improve the quality of the spiritual lives of their congregations through recognising the fear of death and fear of dying that resides in all people, and work to enable conversations and discussions about such fears. Many end-of-life conversations and confessions involve the wish for reconciliation and a sense of peace with others or with past life events. I lament that individuals carry such a heavy burden for so long. I wonder how much better in individual's life would have been had they resolved such issues earlier in their lives. A person with regrets about what they did or did not do, that hasn't been resolved, quite often experience pain in their last few days of life, which palliative care staff recognise is not physical pain, but as emotional or spiritual pain (Doctrine Committee: 2013:27).

As noted above, the denial of death can have a major impact on a person's life. Rohr's model of male spirituality (Rohr: 2005:166-7) highlights the issues if an individual (male in his model) does not come to terms with their mortality, and especially the issues caused by holding on to a strong ego, e.g. being unable to reconcile to others and to God. The church has the ability to engage in helping people of all ages be at ease with their mortality through sermons and workshops, not being afraid of, or lack confidence to, discuss such issues. There are now far more materials available to support such important work.

A church community that is confident to talk about the best of life and a good death will be a healthy community and will enable people to hold their own life

in the context of God's promises (e.g. John 3:16) and reduce the fear of dying and of death. It is time to bring death back in to the 'living room' and out of the hospitals, for it to be seen as a natural consequence of life, and not the end, but a new beginning. The doctrines of salvation, and of death and resurrection of the SEC, as helpfully explored in Grosvenor Essays 5, 6 and 9 are essential tools to help take this important work forward and give confidence to those who need to lead it. Those who lead on these issues in a church need to have been on their own spiritual journey to be equipped to undertake this task, to have shaken off the fear of death and dying for themselves.

And finally, we come to legislation. The AD Bill certainly tightly defines who is eligible and provides sufficient safeguards to reduce the risk of coercion. Should Christians stand against such legislation based on our beliefs, which are not shared by many others? Can in individual who is terminally ill be truly free and have a full understanding and make a decision to die sooner than they otherwise would? Some countries allow foreign nationals to come into their country to die (e.g. Belgium, Switzerland). Those who wish to die with physician support and have the financial means and also are able to travel without support of anyone else, are able to do so. Some of these individuals are travelling when they are well enough to do so which may be earlier than they may otherwise have chosen to die. So, we already have a two-tier system of assisted dying; available for the wealthy and able, and not available for everyone else. Should we deny those without the financial resources or who cannot travel independently to have a physician assisted death at the time of their choosing?

There are real concerns about legalising physician assisted dying, and from my perspective should only be legalised alongside a comprehensive palliative care and hospice service, and with the restrictive definitions of eligibility as set out in the AD Bill.

Nick Bowry, June 2024

2967 words

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Ian Coulter

The Influence of God on Human Creativity: A glance into the Creative Arts

The Influence of God on Human Creativity: A glance into the Creative Arts

Soaring music, tow'ring words,
Art's perfection, scholar's truth,
Joy supreme of human love,
Memory's treasure, grace of youth.

Open, Lord, are these, Thy gifts,
Gifts of love to mind and sense;
Hidden is love's agony,
Love's endeavour, love's expense.
Canon William Hubert Vanstone, excerpt from 'A Hymn to the Creator'.

Human creativity is a profound and intricate phenomenon, often perceived as a divine gift or a reflection of the divine nature itself. Throughout history, the concept of God has significantly shaped human creativity, particularly in the realm of the creative arts. This essay explores how the idea of God has inspired and influenced various artistic endeavours, including literature, music, visual arts, and architecture, and examines the theological bedrocks that have driven artists to create works that reflect their spirituality and faith.

Theological Foundations of Creativity

Throughout history, the concept of God as the creator has been deeply ingrained in religious beliefs. In the tradition the Bible commences, with Genesis portraying God's intentional and meaningful act of creating the world. This notion that humans reflect God's essence suggests that we too harbour an inclination for creativity.

Across cultures and faiths, creativity has often been associated with inspiration. From the Ancient Greek muses who inspired artists and poets to Hinduism's reverence for Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, music, art and wisdom as a fount of creative motivation. It underscores how creativity is not solely a pursuit, but a harmonious interplay, between humanity and divinity.

Poetry has served as a medium to delve into life's enigmas and spiritual aspects. Séamus Heaney, a poet influenced by his upbringing despite his self-professed agnosticism drew from Ireland's rich cultural tapestry in exploring these themes. Heaney was not an anti-Catholic poet. He did not write to discourage others from the faith. Heaney was part of the age group that came into its own

in the 1960s. He painted himself as being an observer of a religion that died out with his parents' generation. This background subtly permeates much of his poetry, shaping its themes, imagery, and moral undertones.[1]

Heaney's poetry often celebrates the beauty and intricacies of the world offering readers a glimpse into the divine through creation. In poems like "Digging" and "Blackberry Picking " he captures the sensations and rich harvests hinting at a spiritual bond with nature. This appreciation for nature resonates with passages from Scripture such, as Psalm 19:1 which declares, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." Through Heaney's descriptions and sensory language, readers may well see traces of God in the landscapes he portrays.

Heaney's poetry goes beyond the world to explore the aspects of human life dealing with topics, like pain, salvation and the quest for purpose. Through works such as "Mid Term Break" and "The Grauballe Man " Heaney addresses the balance of existence and the certainty of death encouraging readers to reflect on the enigmas of life's end and the spiritual essence, within us all. These themes resonate with biblical narratives such as the story of Job, who wrestles with suffering and ultimately finds solace in the presence of God. Through Heaney's exploration of human experience, readers are challenged to confront their own existential questions and to seek meaning in the midst of life's uncertainties.

Throughout history, literature has been greatly impacted by the idea of God with sacred writings, like the Bible, the Quran and the Bhagavad Gita not merely serving as pillars but also as remarkable literary masterpieces that have inspired numerous writers and poets. For example, Dante Alighieris's "Divine Comedy" is a piece of literature that delves deep into Christian beliefs. Dantes's journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven symbolizes the soul's quest for God with imagery reflecting medieval Christian views.

Similarly, John Milton's "Paradise Lost" examines themes of creation downfall and redemption with characters like Satan embodying his exploration of theology and his contemplation on reconciling suffering with divine righteousness. His profound insights into sin and salvation resonate deeply.

[1] Mary O'Regan, Catholic Herald October 3, 2013

In times religious motifs continue to feature prominently in literature. T.S. Eliot’s "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets", for example, explore the emptiness of society alongside the pursuit of spiritual renewal. Eliot’s embrace of Christianity had an impact on his poetry, filling it with a longing for spiritual connection and an air of divine enigma.

"The Brothers Karamazov", the novel by Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, delves into theological inquiries exploring topics such, as faith, uncertainty and the concept of a higher power. The writer's enduring Christian convictions significantly influenced his work, particularly in his exploration of profound life questions.

Music and Divine Inspiration

Music is often referred to as the language of the soul and has a long history of being associated with the divine. In many cultures, music is an integral part of religious worship and is believed to have the power to connect humans with the divine.

Gregorian chant, for instance, is a type of plainchant of the Roman Catholic Church. These quiet, elegiac works reflect a mood of contemplative worship and seek to lift the soul towards God. Common texts are drawn from the Bible itself, making a direct connection to the music of sacred scripture.

During the Baroque period, the creation of some of the most profound religious music occurred, with composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, and Antonio Vivaldi. Bach's music, in particular, is a testament to his deep Lutheran faith. His compositions, such as the “St. Matthew Passion” and the “Mass in B” minor, are not just musical masterpieces but also profound expressions of his religious devotion.

Handel's “Messiah”, his most renowned oratorio (and, incidentally first performed in Dublin in 1741), is another prime example. Its “Hallelujah Chorus” is one of the most famous pieces of religious music and is often performed during the Christmas and Easter seasons. The text of “Messiah” is drawn from the Bible, and its composition reflects Handel's belief in the power of music to convey the divine message.

In more recent times, gospel music, a genre rooted in the African American religious experience, has profoundly influenced various music styles, including jazz, blues, and rock. The emphasis of Gospel music is on vocal expression and its themes of hope, salvation, and divine love continue to inspire musicians, audiences as well as congregations.

Visual Arts and the Depiction of the Divine

Visual arts have been another powerful medium through which we humans have expressed our understanding and relationship with God. Religious art spans various cultures and historical periods, each reflecting its unique theological perspectives.

In Western art, the Renaissance period stands out as a time when artists sought to portray the divine with unprecedented realism and beauty. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, with its iconic depiction of the Creation of Adam, is a profound expression of the biblical creation narrative. Leonardo da Vinci's “The Last Supper” captures the moment of Christ's revelation of betrayal, blending theological significance with human emotion.

Icons, used in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, are another form of religious art with deep theological significance. Icons are not merely decorative; they are considered windows to the divine, intended to aid in worship and contemplation. The intricate symbolism and the reverence with which they are created reflect the belief in the presence of the divine within the artwork. This, perhaps, is why icons are read, not viewed. Icons such as Andrei Rublev's "Trinity" are created with the intent of spiritual contemplation and prayer. These artworks are considered windows to the divine, embodying deep theological significance and serving as aids to devotion.

Islamic art, characterized by its intricate geometric patterns and calligraphy, reflects the transcendence and unity of God. The prohibition against depicting human and animal forms in Islamic religious art led to the development of a unique aesthetic that emphasizes the beauty of divine creation through abstraction and pattern.

Hindu and Buddhist art, with their detailed depictions of deities, also reflect a deep theological symbolism. These artworks often depict scenes from sacred texts and myths, intended to inspire devotion and convey religious teachings.

Architecture: Sacred Spaces as Reflections of Divine Order

Architecture, as a form of creative expression, has also been profoundly influenced by religious beliefs. Sacred architecture not only provides a space for worship but also reflects theological principles and the community's relationship with the divine.

Gothic cathedrals, such as Notre-Dame de Paris and Chartres Cathedral, are marvels of medieval architecture. Their soaring spires, intricate stained glass windows, and elaborate sculptures are intended to reflect the glory of God and inspire awe and reverence in the worshippers. The verticality of Gothic architecture symbolizes the soul's ascent to God, while the light filtering through stained glass represents divine illumination. In Islamic architecture, mosques such as the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the Blue Mosque in Istanbul reflect the principles of Islamic art and theology. The use of domes, minarets, and elaborate tile work creates a sense of harmony and order, reflecting the unity and transcendence of God. The orientation towards Mecca and the integration of gardens and water features symbolize paradise and spiritual purification.

Hindu temples, like the Brihadeeswarar Temple and the temples of Khajuraho, are designed to represent the cosmos and the abode of the gods. The intricate carvings and the layout of the temple complex reflect the Hindu belief in the interconnectedness of all creation and the presence of the divine in the material world.

Buddhist stupas and pagodas, such as the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar and the Borobudur in Indonesia, are designed to symbolize the path to enlightenment. The architectural elements and the sacred geometry of these structures are intended to guide the worshipper's meditation and spiritual journey.

The Contemporary Intersection of Faith and Creativity

Today, the combination of faith and creativity continues to be a source of inspiration for contemporary artists across various disciplines. Despite the art world's gradual secularization, many artists are still drawn to spiritual themes and questions in their work.

Key contemporary visual artists, including Anselm Kiefer and Bill Viola, are examples of artists whose work has touched upon themes of spirituality, transcendence, and the human condition. Kiefer's work, which frequently features symbolism and mythological references, has also engaged with theological questions; while Viola's video installations often suggest the sublime, and thus the spiritual.

Contemporary writers, such as Marilynne Robinson and Yann Martel, continue to explore faith and doubt in the modern world. A key figure in the contemporary art world, Robinson's novels such as "Gilead" and "Home" have engaged with how people live out or grapple with their faith. Martel's "Life of Pi" wrestles with a similar subject—that is, the negotiation of faith and our response to the need for stories that tell us who we are.

In music, contemporary composers such as Arvo Pärt and John Tavener have composed works that draw on elements of religious thought and practice. Pärt's use of minimalism, such as in "Spiegel im Spiegel", reminds us of both timelessness and the spirituality it represents. Tavener, an Orthodox Christian, has produced many meditative works, often using liturgy in his compositions.

Conclusion

Contemporary society has grown to appreciate the role of God in creative human endeavours. Among them is the creative arts, all of which have been deeply affected by God's presence. Theological thoughts and religion have motivated literature, music, visual arts, and architecture throughout history. These works of art demonstrate the human longing for transcendental understanding as well as reflections on faith as a rich source of spiritual encouragement.

As we continue to navigate the post-modern world, faith and creativity persist as a dynamic vital interplay of humanity and divine exploration through art.

With faith yet entwined in creativity, our human existence is fulfilled through artistic encounters by which we are moved to find purpose, meaning, and hope in a world far too rapidly changing. Evidence of this can readily be found in the beauty of a painting from the Renaissance or the message within a symphony or the reverent atmosphere of sacred architecture. Creativity and the divine continue to interrelate, illuminate and guide human experience.

The biblical story tells us that human creativity is not a product of human capacity in itself, but a divine gift from a creative and loving God to humanity. From God the creator to the inspiration of the artist, the artisan, the composer, the architect and the poet, the Bible expresses the imagination of human creativity as a gift from God. God participates in the creativity of humanity and invites humanity to continue his work of creation.

When we recognize our creative impulses as divine and produce our work in order to glorify God, we respect the holy partnership between God and humanity

Ian Coulter
Kilkenny, Ireland
14th June 2024

Raphael Duckett

Speaking about God during War

Speaking about God during War – Chaplain Raphael Duckett RN

We live in a time of geopolitical churn, established norms of Nation State behaviour are being challenged and land and resource grabs more pronounced. Inside the traditional Christian paradigm of Just War Theology we are increasingly disturbed by the emergence of non-traditional and hybrid war which seems to mix peace (absence of violence) with war. Non-state and shadow state actors are increasingly present in the conflict zone. How then do Christians speak about God during war.

The stated aim of the UK military is to wage war proportionally and not wage indiscriminate attacks; the doctrine of armed conflict is ingrained in UK military personnel. Chaplains respond to this structure by developing the concept of the moral warrior. Challenges emerge in implementing these concepts when conflict emerges with states that do not share these paradigms.

When defining war becomes harder and states define their actions with descriptions designed to avoid using the term war it remains possible to call out situations as War irrespective of whether one or both of the parties choose to do so. Attempts to obfuscate conflict with linguistic gymnastics are not new and in the modern media savvy world are just new tools in which to shape and win the conflict space by manipulating public opinion.

Military Chaplains are employed by many nations around the world, all world faiths are represented, this paper will look at the specifically the practice of UK Royal Navy military Chaplains from the Christian perspective. We shall look at three contexts peace time, hybrid conflict and total war, concentrating on hybrid conflict and total war.[1]

Peacetime

During peacetime the role of a Chaplain is primarily pastoral care of service personnel and their families. Sailors seek out the Chaplain for support and guidance in resolving a range of personal/family issues. A minor role is the provision of religious leadership; acts of worship, instruction in faith matters, providing direction. The Chaplain will go where the Sailor goes, whether at sea or in a port/training establishment[2]. The aim is to be a witness of presence staying nearby those to whom we minister. Incarnationally witnessing of God's presence wherever we go. Speaking of God in these circumstances is through using pastoral interactions, a ministry of walking the patch, utilising formal occasions for remembrance of those who have died in the service, pastoral offices etc. In some respects the function of Chaplain in peacetime is analogous to a traditional parish priest with an all souls ministry but in the context of a kinetic and intrinsically dangerous working environment.

Chaplains are integrated into the Command Chain and will participate in planning and operational meetings. They are welcomed because of their independent perspective and the opportunity to provide Command with ethical advice.

The challenge for Chaplaincy in peacetime is justifying its continued presence in the military with the decline in personnel identifying as believing in God. The development of a Multifaith Chaplaincy approach is the solution as far as the diversity and inclusion requirements of modern society require, as this treats all faiths as a protected characteristic.

[1] Definitions - Peace time is the absence of overt armed conflict; hybrid conflict Hybrid warfare is the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects and total war is the mobilisation of the whole state apparatus in the pursuit of conflict goals

[2] Matthew 28.19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (NIV)

Hybrid Conflict

Once the situation moves into a kinetic engagement, those in which munitions and aggressive action are present, the role of Chaplain becomes more focused. The aphorism "there are no atheists in the foxholes" has more than a grain of truth. The closer to peril people are the deeper their thoughts on where ultimate protection comes from.[3] Chaplains are not usually deployed in the front echelon of conflict as they are defined as Non-Combatants in both the Geneva Convention and United Nations Charters and carry no weapons. Chaplains operate in the second and third echelon immediately supporting the front line. Whilst this is the normal situation, a Chaplain on a Warship in a conflict zone is clearly operating in a frontline capacity and in a rapidly changing conflict situation the definition of front line and rear echelon is difficult to achieve consistently.

The Chaplains role becomes a focus more on religious leadership and unit cohesion[4], opportunities emerge for clear presentation of the Gospel to individuals and the provision of religious services (all Royal Navy warships provide a voluntary act of worship afloat every Sunday). These gatherings become places for service personnel to encounter the presence of God with them.

Hybrid Conflict is especially challenging as it involves the use of non-traditional weapons or traditional weaponry deployed in innovative ways. The Ukrainian War is one that has escalated from a hybrid war into total war. Shadow operatives were involved in the original invasion and continued to play a major role until recently.

Total War

Total war is the full utilisation of the state's resources in the pursuit of war aims. Significant stages of this are mobilisation of all reserves, general conscription and redirection of the economy to war munitions output. This is a more traditional status of conflict, with defined fronts and identifiable targets. The nature of the war becomes more settled in terms of location of armed conflict and the nature of targets selected for attack.

This type of conflict has a tendency to demonise the enemy, as a justification for the conflict and in religious societies the description of the war as a holy instrument of god can emerge. In Russia today there is emerging a Russian Orthodox Nuclear theology that sees a nuclear exchange as a holy instrument in the formation of the coming Kingdom of God. Thus the Russian Orthodox Church becomes a means that the state justifies its actions within the context of both an existential threat to "mother Russia" and the end of days judgement of God.

States seek to leverage every advantage in overcoming their adversaries and using religion is one tool in the armoury to be used. This entails the close identification of the state's aims or survival with tenants of that religion. The co-option of a religious framework to support conflict is the challenge every Chaplain faces their response should be as Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying "my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.'

Chaplains fulfil the same sorts of role in Total War as in hybrid conflict but with the additional scale of the conflict comes a greater role in the support of injured personnel, the families of those killed in the conflict and assisting the comrades of those who have been injured or killed in processing their

[3] Psalm 20.7 "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God."
[4] Unit Cohesion - monitor morale, mediate disputes, and facilitate communication between ranks and departments to maximise unit effectiveness

feelings. More regular involvement in funerals and the support of the injured becomes the pattern of ministry in war.

Speaking of God during war

A core belief of Christians is the omnipresence of God, God is present everywhere, in all spaces and places. He is present everywhere because He is not localised anywhere, the Creator of all things made visible and invisible is not made but is eternal and spiritual.[5] Understanding that the eternal God is present with us wherever and whenever we are is both a comfort and a challenge. There is no where beyond His presence and no situation without Him.

The Chaplains key role is to protect the humanity of the service person. War is sin and mars the image of God in the Person.

Blessing that which is not Holy is not the role of a Christian Chaplain but rather the restoration and renewal offered through a relationship with the Father through the sacrifice of the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit is the foundation of the comfort provided by Chaplains.[6] The comfort Chaplains provide then is based on this acknowledgement of the humanity of the service person, despite the inhumanity of war. It is founded on the concepts of restoration, reconciliation and forgiveness. These are interlinked concepts and will be applied to the individual specifically to meet their needs, the healing of the wounds of war is a complex and often long term process. Our society recognises Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and is beginning to see the case for Moral Injury but a Chaplain is uniquely placed to see the whole human being in the likeness of God.

Restoration is a key Biblical theme ultimately linked by being restored to the Promised Land as a type representing the Kingdom to come, looking forward to a time of prosperity and bliss. Offering a hope of restoration in the ultimate needs to be grounded during war for the individual to take hold of it for themselves in the present. A pie in the sky when you die is not a lively faith for military personnel used to practical and physical lives. The challenge of a vision of wholeness restored in the brokenness of now is a familiar one written large across the pages of Scripture. The fall from Eden through slavery in Egypt to the Exodus and ultimate expulsion from the Promised Land is the story of humanity walking away from God and yet God calling us back to Himself constantly.

Reconciliation[7] as a key Christian theological dynamic entails not just the restoration of friendly relations and peace between previous combatants but of the whole of creation including each of us through the sacrifice of Jesus. The universality of God's saving love in Christ means that it reaches everyone in all situations, including in war. The provision of a peace that passes all human understanding is a gift that the Lord provides His people and is a balm to those hard pressed about, which is an apt description of service personnel at war.

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[5] Dt 4.39 "Acknowledge and take heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below, There is no other"

[6] Romans 12.21 "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

[7] Colossians 1.19-23 "[19] For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.[21] Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of[a] your evil behavior. [22] But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— [23] if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

Finally forgiveness, God's mercy on us an undeserving people. This gift to those in conflict is difficult for them to accept during the actual kinetic phase of operation, they are too tied up in the practicalities of lethal war fighting to acknowledge either their need of forgiveness or their need to forgive others. This process often emerges sometime after the action has ceased when time for reflection and review emerges, the concept of moral injury and its treatment revolve around forgiveness. Chaplains can help service personnel on the journey of accepting the forgiveness of God and using the strength of the Lord to forgive others. Deep and dark conversations are had about the reality of war and its ongoing impact

Conclusion

So speaking about God in the context of war will require the same apologetic approach as is encountered by every Christian witnessing in a fallen world. How can we speak of the goodness of God in the context of evil. It is precisely the presence of evil that calls for the speaking about God to be the central calling of all Christians. When evil is not confronted by the goodness of God then it continues to thrive. Speaking of God during War is necessary and vital in any attempt to preserve the humanity of combatants, they vitally need this after the war to live not just exist.

However, speaking about God must never be confused with speaking for God, the dangers of appropriating God's favour on our side and the peril of not standing up against evil needs careful judgement[8]. It is equally a sin to fail to speak of God than it is to not speak right about God. Appropriately handling the Word of God is one of the callings of a Chaplain, to bind up the broken hearted and proclaim liberty to the oppressed, and is why doing the hard work of understanding the calling of a Chaplain before entering a conflict zone is important. The Chaplain must have an internal resilience built on a profound sense of calling or they are in danger of burning out and failing to appropriately witness to God's presence in War situations. The history of Military Chaplaincy gives a long list of Chaplains who were profoundly changed by their experiences during war, some of whom turned this into fruitful ministry afterward but all to many were broken by their time in conflicts.

Speaking about God during War is a challenging role, it is all to easy to be misinterpreted as an apologist for the war or as a hopeless idealist proclaiming peace when all about is in flames. The calling then of the Chaplain is to be the praxis between our faith at peace and the faith militant.

Working in an inherently dangerous environment where the emphasis is on the practical and physical, it can seem incongruous to people without faith that Chaplaincy continues to thrive. Surely we have evolved passed such fairytale and myth? But the human experience continues to crave a deeper meaning, significance and purpose for existence, which is precisely the message that the Gospel continues to offer each of us and why the role of Chaplain to the Military continues to exist.

[8] Job 42.7 "**7** After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has."

Richard Frith

Speaking about God, Speaking to God: Liturgy and Mission in a 'Secular' Age

Speaking about God, Speaking to God: Liturgy and Mission in a 'Secular' Age

Richard Frith

What cultural language do we use to speak about God? And what difference does it make if the language we are using turns out, in fact, to be unequal to the task? And where might we find a better language? In this paper, I want to suggest, first, that there is a serious issue with the cultural language in which we typically try to talk about God today; second, that the language of the Church's historic liturgy can provide a better model for speaking about God, as well as for speaking to him; and third, to make some observations about how this might work in missional practice, drawing partly on my own pastoral experience.

Some years ago, Stephen Bevans set out a series of 'models of contextual theology' – a taxonomy of the ways in which Christians might address the task of speaking of God in the diverse contexts of global modernity. The first of these models that he outlines is what he calls the 'translation model'. According to Bevans, the translation model sees 'the values and thought forms of culture and the structures of social change' as 'convenient vehicles' for conveying the 'essential, unchanging deposit of truth' that is the gospel; in other words, that there is a 'core' of the gospel message, that can be expressed propositionally in language that makes it comprehensible to the cultural context being addressed.[1] Defenders of the translation model argue that it has a long, indeed a biblical, pedigree, often pointing to St Paul's address to the Areopagus in Acts chapter 17.

[1] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. edn (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002), p. 37, 40, 41.

In much of the Church's work of apologetics and engagement with culture today, the translation model continues to be the standard *modus operandi*. Think of that most British and middle-class forum of public theology, Radio 4's Thought for the Day, in which each day a religious figure attempts the daunting task of triangulating a current news story, the life of the listener, and a faith perspective, in less than three minutes. But there are good reasons for thinking that, in the world of 'secular modernity', the language of our contemporary culture might be a serious impediment to the articulation of the gospel. To explore why this might be the case, and to outline a possible way out of this impasse, I will be using insights from the contemporary theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, and in particular the work of Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank.

Milbank begins chapter one of his major work *Theology and Social Theory* with a bold contention: 'Once, there was no secular.'[2] The contention, in very broad terms, is that, until the advent of modernity, there was no gulf between what we would call 'religious' and 'secular' life. All of life was held within a sacral understanding. The nave of a parish church might well have been used for 'worldly' activities such as judicial proceedings, fairs, or even dancing, but this does not mean that they were regarded as 'secular' spaces in our terms, because all human activity was conceived as being within a divine economy. Such a 'theological' view of life was the norm in ancient times, and actually provided some basis of shared understanding between Christians and pagans in the Roman empire – thus enabling the spread of the gospel. However, with the advent of modernity (the origins of which Milbank dates as far back as the late Middle Ages), for various reasons a radically new conception arose of human beings as self-governing subjects. God was not (yet) banished from the scene, but came to be seen as the greatest power in a world of autonomous, and therefore inevitably competing, powers – rather than, as had previously been the

[2] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (New York and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

case, as the reality which underlies and upholds all earthly life and power. Once human beings began to think in this way, then it became possible in effect to ignore God. Subsequent developments in religion, politics, and science – from the Reformation, to the theory of evolution, to globalisation – pushed God further from the centre to the margins, from where (in the west, at least) today Christians find themselves having to work incredibly hard to keep the rumour of God alive at all.

In twenty-first century Britain, the secular is the air we breathe, and like the literal oxygen that we take into our lungs, we do not notice it. To attempt to step outside of the atmosphere of our own culture is, of course, impossible. Christians must try to speak for God from within it, but this can lead to serious difficulties. For example, attempts to uphold the gospel imperative of standing with and speaking for marginalised groups frequently lead us to draw insights – consciously or otherwise, and often very indirectly – from Marxism. And yet, as Milbank demonstrates, the basic paradigm of Marxism is one of conflict – the conviction that the world is divided into oppressors and oppressed, be the dividing lines social, racial, or ones of gender or sexuality.[3] Such conflict is seen as inevitable and indeed desirable, if the lot of the 'oppressed' is to be improved. We even draw such assumptions into our intra-Church debates – witness Anglicanism's endless conflict on 'human sexuality'. We realise, if we reflect, that this is a long way from the New Testament command to love one another, but we find it hard to imagine another way to resolve our tensions.

In short, secular modernity is not a 'neutral space', in spite of our culture's prevailing assumption that it is just that. To accept (as secular voices will often tell us) that faith can have a 'voice' in cultural conversations alongside other voices, is implicitly to accept a situation where God occupies no privileged position. As Christians we cannot believe this, but it is very difficult not to act as though we do. A more philosophical way of putting this insight, developed by Catherine Pickstock,

[3] See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, *pp*. 177–205.

is that secular modernity is characterised by a tendency to 'spacialisation' – the division of the world into different spheres, discourses, fields of knowledge. Simon Oliver, in introducing this concept, asks us to consider a modern university campus. 'Certain faculties sit alongside each other, for example classics and philosophy. […] Some are spatially far apart, for example theology and the natural sciences.'[4] A public library or bookshop would be a similar example of this phenomenon. Such special organisation both reflects and informs the way in which we tend to 'categorise' reality. Such a taxonomy inevitably confines theology, and thus God, to a 'department'. Implicitly we accept this taxonomy, and thus our speech about God becomes defensive, or (in the negative sense) apologetic. We find ourselves steadfastly defending the two minutes and forty-five seconds allotted to Thought for the Day in the *Today* programme. Where can we look for an alternative paradigm for our speech about God?

In her book *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Pickstock makes the surprising contention is that it is to be found in that most familiar of all languages for most practising Christians: the language of liturgy. It is not possible in the space available here to summarise in a meaningful way Pickstock's complex and multivalent argument that the language and logic of the Eucharist provides the best, indeed for her the only, antidote to the assumptions of modernity. To pull out one particular thread, she suggests that the logic of spacialisation is an artificial one, which does not reflect our actual experience of reality. In order to get past it, we need to recover what she calls the 'liturgical' logic of premodernity. In a long central chapter, entitled 'I will go unto the Altar of God', Pickstock provides a close reading of the text of the Roman Rite of the Mass, in which she seeks to demonstrate how the order and language of the Eucharist, with its many ambiguities, repetitions, and even redundancies, embodies and enacts a vision of life which is both properly

[4] Simon Oliver, 'Introduction to Part III', in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 151–53 (p. 152).

theocentric and faithful to the human experience of relating to him.[5] In order to give a sense of this, I will outline briefly two of the major characteristics of the liturgy which Pickstock identifies: first, the methodological one of repetition; and second, the theological one of gift.

The Eucharist is, even in its modern rites, a strangely repetitious text. It contains, for example, multiple and repeated prayers for purification as, throughout the liturgy, we gradually approach the altar. In a Common Worship service, for example, we would pray a Confession at the beginning of the service, which may well be followed by the *Kyrie* eleison, with is six- or ninefold pleas for mercy. Then, even following the Absolution and pronouncement of God's forgiveness, follows the *Gloria in excelsis*, which even in the midst of its primary emphasis on God's praise and glory, renews the prayer for Christ to 'have mercy on us'. Before the Eucharistic Prayer, we might pray the Prayer of Humble Access, in which we pray so to receive the Sacrament, that 'our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, | and our souls washed through his most precious blood'. Then, after the Eucharistic Prayer, in the Lord's Prayer we pray again for the forgiveness of our sins or trespasses, and then again in the *Agnus Dei*, which appears to have originated as a repeated excerpt from the *Gloria*, we pray again for Christ to have mercy on us. Other examples could be added, depending (for example) on which Eucharistic Prayer is used. On the whole we tend not to notice these strange, circling repetitions, because the words are so familiar to us. But the effect of the whole liturgy, itself repeated again and again, week after week and indeed in many churches more than once in a single Sunday, is

[5] Despite writing as an Anglican, Pickstock takes as her paradigm the medieval Roman Rite because, as she says, 'the recent revised liturgies of the Anglican and Roman Church', in spite of their claim 'to recover a purer and more ancient liturgical structure, nevertheless can be seen to have (unwittingly) incorporated the linguistic and epistemological structures of modernity' (Pickstock, p. 170). Consider, for example, Common Worship's division of the Eucharist into four sections, the 'Gathering', the 'Liturgy of the Word', the 'Liturgy of the Sacrament', and the 'Dismissal', which Pickstock would see as a modern, spacialised segregation. Nevertheless, much of Pickstock's argument can be applied to modern rites of the Eucharist, which retain the traditional texts which constitute the core of the liturgy.

to take us away from the secular world of rationality and spacialisation, and into a different world, where human time is dissolved into eternity, and we become conscious – however dimly – of our dependence on God for the grace to approach his altar.

To be brought into the realm of grace is to become aware of the supreme importance of gift. As Pickstock puts it, in modern, secular thinking, reality is simply understood as 'given', whereas in the logic of the Eucharist it becomes clear that it is, rather, 'gift' – the gift of God. Through the repetitious, circuitous journey towards 'the altar of God', we are gradually inaugurated into an awareness that all good things are the gift of God. Pickstock takes as a particular example the gift of 'peace', for which we pray at various points during the service, from the longer form of the Greeting ('Grace, mercy, and peace […] be with you'), through the Gloria, the Peace, and the *Agnus Dei*, to the Dismissal, where we are told to 'go in peace'. The dimensions of gift implicit in the text of the Eucharist are far too numerous and complex to be explored fully here. The root meaning of the word 'Eucharist' is 'thanksgiving', and this reminds us that the whole movement of the liturgy is one of thanksgiving to God's gratuitous self-gift to us which we receive in the Sacrament – and which, in receiving, we are taken up ourselves into the perpetual self-gift of Christ to the Father, and thus into the life of the Holy Trinity, Godself. Pickstock points to the Doxology to the Eucharistic Prayer, the great prayer of thanksgiving, which we offer to the Father 'through Jesus Christ our Lord, by whom, and with whom, and in whom, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory be yours, almighty Father'.[6]

The implication of Pickstock's arguments, for our purposes, is that what Bevans identifies as the 'translation model' of contextual theology – the model which continues to be the default modus operandi for the Church's attempts to speak

[6] Pickstock, p. 243.

about God today – is significantly flawed, because it gives away far too much ground to a secular understanding of reality. We need to recover a properly theological basis from which to speak. The problem, as I suggested earlier, is that the secular worldview is such a universally and unconsciously shared assumption in the modern West that any attempt to speak in a different language can be felt to be impossible. This is a serious consideration, and one to which I will return in my closing section. First, though, I want to suggest briefly that in order to be able to begin to speak to contemporary culture, the Church must first begin to recover a confidence in its own inherited language, the language of liturgy and above all of the Eucharist, which is itself the best 'translation' we have of the economy of grace which is revealed to us in Scripture.

As Alison Milbank has recently noted, 'we live in unprecedented times in that the centrality of Holy Communion is being questioned in the Church of England as never before'. She contrasts this situation with the perspective of the English Reformers, 'who sought to establish more frequent reception of the sacrament, a desire also at the heart of the Evangelical Revival of the early nineteenth century'. [7] In contrast, in many contemporary 'expressions of church', the Eucharist is implicitly seen as optional. Milbank has noted elsewhere that on the websites of many of the Church of England's new wave of 'resource churches' it can be impossible to find out when the Eucharist is celebrated.[8] In a huge number of other churches, regular celebration of the Eucharist is now confined to an earlier Sunday service, at around 9.00am, while a later 'contemporary' service, which is the focus of all the church's children's and young people's work, offers Holy Communion monthly at most. The effect of all of this is to make the Eucharist into a minority sport, and to further reduce even the residual understanding of the logic of gift that it embodies.

I am, of course, entirely biased in saying all of this. All of my ministerial experience to date has been in contexts that have been squarely eucharistically focused. This has comprised a curacy in parish of Anglo-Catholic tradition in central Oxford, an

[7] Alison Milbank, 'Being Eucharist' (manuscript, publication forthcoming).
[8] Alison Milbank, *The Once and Future Parish* (London: SCP, p. 75).

incumbency in a parish of more 'central' churchmanship in West Yorkshire, and now a small cathedral. My title post and my current context are hugely different in many respects, but both are to some extent gathered congregations, and both have shared a sense of offering a deliberate witness to the wider Church – in the city and the diocese – of the Church's traditional worship, in the midst of other understandings that differ, in some cases quite radically. More interesting for my present purposes is my experience as a parish priest, five years during which that church saw significant growth which was I believe, on reflection, to have been deeply related to a developing sense among the congregation of what it means to worship, and to live, eucharistically. Most of what we did during that time, practically speaking, was quite unremarkable, tried-and-tested stuff: restarting a children's choir, leading eventually to a youth group; introducing a monthly family Eucharist, in deliberate contrast to the relatively formal, traditional and choral style of other Sunday mornings, with children reading, often leading intercessions, and also in the Eucharistic Prayer, through the use of one of the Church of England's 'Additional Eucharistic Prayers'. Some of the simpler texts provided in Common Worship, such as the words 'God's holy gifts for God's holy people' at the Invitation to Communion can, with regular use, lead people into a deep sense of participation in an economy of grace. There was, over time, expressed by members of the congregation both older and younger, an understanding of a depth of engagement with God that was rooted in a sense of mystery and community as we gathered together around God's table week by week – of being caught up in the perpetually self-giving, overflowing love of the Holy Trinity. This understanding gradually and quite organically began to bear fruit in a stronger sense of service to our local community. A toddler group was relaunched and thrived, a daytime drop-in session for isolated older people was begun, resulting eventually in a Christmas lunch provided in the church hall for those who would otherwise have been alone. We began to find a 'language' – albeit a language that, for many members of the congregation would have remained largely an implicit one – that enabled us to witness to our local community to the perpetually self-emptying, mutually giving love of God made known to us in the Eucharist. Alison Milbank gives a number of

suggestions much more adventurous than anything we tried, as to how the Eucharist might 'work' as an explicitly missional act in contemporary culture – by celebrating the Sacrament outside in the midst of the community, for example.[9] In any case, it is clear, despite the seeming assumptions of today's Church of England to the contrary, that the Eucharist can and does function both as a missional act, and as the centre of missional work in local communities.

To return then, finally, to the question of how we speak about God. The great danger, in our cultural context, is that we accept the 'spacialised' understanding of our times, because it seems like the only one on offer. Theologically, this can easily lead to an implicit adoption of a 'God of the gaps' approach, in which we invoke God to deal with those aspects of human experience – of wonder or of suffering, for example – which secular, scientifically-informed discourse seems to struggle to explain. Or else, in our outreach work, we can fall into what Ann Morisy once called 'needs meeting', 'becoming a voluntary provider of care and service' within a secular public- and third sector.[10] In either case, we are by default accepting the 'story' told by secular modernity, and attempting to make the case for God from within it. If we are to overcome this difficulty, we must recover a sense of, and a confidence in, our own story – the story of the gospel, and its logic of grace and gift, of divine time and of eternity. But if we are to tell this story, we must first live it. I have attempted to argue in this paper that the best means for beginning to do so lies close to hand, where it has lain for two thousand years, in the Eucharist. The world will not necessarily understand our language, and perhaps we must accept that as part of the cost of mission in a secular world. But a eucharistically animated life, and a eucharistically animated Church, will surely intrigue and, for some, open doors to curiosity and faith – and to an approach to the altar of God.

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[9] Milbank, 'Being Eucharist', *op. cit.*

[10] Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 25–26.

Melanie Otto

How do we talk about God to a Windrush community given the historical connections of the established church to African chattel enslavement?

How do we talk about God to a Windrush community given the historical connections of the established church to African chattel enslavement?

Introduction

2020 was a tumultuous year. We experienced a global pandemic, we witnessed the murder of George Floyd in the US, the toppling of Colston's statue, and senior staff in the Church of England 'taking the knee' in an act of solidarity against the sin that was, and is, systemic racism. This event brought into sharp focus the ongoing consequences of the slave trade and prompted the church to reflect on its own complicated and shameful relationship with the African chattel enslavement.

In an article in the Church Times in June 2020, a spokesperson for the Church of England said: *"While we recognise the leading role clergy and active members of the Church of England played in securing the abolition of slavery, it is a source of shame that others within the Church actively perpetrated slavery and profited from it.*[1]

It is the knowledge that the church was complicit in the slave trade, including, as we learnt recently, that a former Archbishop approved payments for the purchase of enslaved people [2] that has prompted me to reflect on how I speak about God within my context as vicar of a parish made up of descendants from the Windrush generation who themselves are the descendants of those who had been traded as chattel.

This essay will only scratch the service of this critical subject, and will by no means claim to have any definitive answers, but my hope is that through the voices of my parishioners, who offered their views on the questions I posed, we will gain some understanding of how the church's historical links with the African chattel enslavement has impacted the message of the gospel, and will inform how we reflect Jesus' own actions of justice and reconciliation.

Questions posed and answers given

To understand better how to speak about God to the parish in the light of the church's involvement with African chattel enslavement, I asked ten people five questions relating to this matter. Firstly, I needed to know how much of the history they knew.

One knew that the church had played '*a significant role in the slave trade, many members of the clergy owned slaves and even profited from the trade of slaves, some even owned plantations in many Caribbean islands.'* [3]

[1] https://www.churchofengland.org/church-and-legacy-slavery

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/25/revealed-how-church-of-englands-ties-to-chattel-slavery-went-to-top-of-hierarchy#:~:text=In%20response%20to%20the%20Observer's,enslaved%20people%20is%20particularly%20painful.

[3] Respondent 1

Another said '*The Anglican Church didn't see Africans as people, they were a commodity to be used to make money*
They sent missionaries to Africa when slavery was abolished, to make sure that the Africans abandoned their religion and culture and adopted the western religion and culture.[4] Another commented *'The church played a pivotal role in endorsing the enslavement of African people. The money they made was used to pay clergy, build the church and make a huge amount of money. They were fundamentally racist and believed that spreading the good news justified their abhorrent involvement in the African slave trade'.*[5]
Similar thoughts were repeated by other respondents, and all clearly felt that the church was fully complicit in the degradation and dehumanising of their people. There was a significant level of mistrust and anger that an institution purporting to be of God could behave in such a way, and that behaviour that caused the original sin of the slave trade, was still being seen in their lives today.

The second question asked how this knowledge made them feel. There was an overwhelming response of anger. '*This makes me feel really angry, robbed, cheated and very disappointed. The church's behaviour makes me question my decision to be a member of an organisation that saw my ancestors as less than. Does the church still see us as less than?'* [6]
Another said she was '*broken-hearted*' [7] by what she was discovering about the Church and had turned to the book of Lamentations as a way of processing what was essentially grief and pain. She felt discouraged that the church had taken such small steps to face its history and others felt this was just another example of the lip service paid by the church. People were tired of hearing that the church was 'sorry' with no actions being offered to change things.
Emotions ran deep and repercussions for how faith is shared and spoken about are not insignificant.

My third question asked how the gospel was affected by knowing that the church was involved in taking away freedom that was a God-given right. For one *"the message of Jesus is love, joy, and peace to all people regardless of their background or status. When the church dehumanizes others, it's misleading the teachings of Jesus'*.[8] This sentiment was repeated several times with one respondent feeling that the church does not 'recognise' black people and that their youth had turned away from Christianity because of *the spiritual assault on their lives due to many years of dealing with historical racism, discrimination and hardship.*'[9]
They saw the Christian faith as hypocritical and unjust, with many looking to Rastafarianism and Islam as more meaningful alternatives. This was a big concern for respondents who still felt connected to Christianity and who wanted their young people to embrace it.
Another felt that the active participation in the trafficking of Africans was not compatible with the Christian message of love given that they had '*no regard for those Africans who just like them were made in God's image.'* [10] One commented that the so called 'good news' was

[4] Respondent 2
[5] Respondent 3
[6] Respondent 3
[7] Respondent 4
[8] Respondent 1
[9] Respondent 2
[10] Respondent 3

only good for some; that those holding the bible also held the power, and that this power had been wielded to the detriment of the black people. The 'Curse of Ham' (Genesis 9:18-25) was mentioned which tells the story of Noah cursing Ham because he looked upon his nakedness and condemning Ham's son Canaan to be a 'slave to his brothers'. This misrepresentation of the term 'Ham' [11]is problematic and highlights the problems we face when speaking about God, particularly in reference to Scripture which have been misused to exert power and control over others.

My fourth question was 'what can the church do to make things right?' The overwhelming response was that the church needs to *'confront its past, repent for the wrong doings and work toward restoring faith in its people'.* [12] They appreciated this would be difficult and painful but felt that the only way forward was for the church *'to face the truth, humble itself and openly and meaningfully apologise for its involvement.'*[13] They wanted an acknowledgment and apology displayed in churches where diaspora communities live, and to see the church actively rebuilding those communities that have been traumatised by the history that has passed down through the centuries. One respondent called for the church to have its 'Zacchaeus moment' and to restore all that past generations had lost and many now still benefitted from.

Finally, I asked how we speak of God to those who have been hurt by systemic racism within the church. What was clear from all the respondents was a deep desire to be heard, listened to, and seen. They wanted their history and their suffering to be acknowledged and to see genuine remorse being offered. One gave the following response *'The church has to listen to the concerns of the community, offer support to those that were affected by racism and maintain the message that the church is about love, equality and justice for everyone.'*[14] They saw trust was a barrier to the gospel and felt the church needed to engage with them in their spaces and to partner with them in the work they were already doing. They believed intentional conversations and dialogue to build understanding was crucial, as was proper representation and diversity within the power structures of the church. [15]
A recurring theme was that the church should fund services for youth, the elderly, homeless, drug projects, and education to redress the damages of the past. Providing scholarships, bursaries and access to mental health services, was seen as a way of putting the gospel into action, that is, not just talking about being sorry, but doing something concrete to put it right.[16]

So how *do* we speak about God?

Reflecting on the answers given, I would suggest that there are three key areas that emerge that need to be addressed before we can speak more authentically about God:

[11] Ham was misinterpreted from the Semitic word for dark or black, and was used to justify the enslavement of black people, according to Professor David Goldenberg as seen on After the Flood, MJR, 2022.
[12] Respondent 1
[13] Respondent 4
[14] Respondent 6
[15] Respondent 7 felt there was not enough work being done to actively listen to black and minority ethnic voices on the ground.
[16] Respondent 8 wanted to see some action rather than just more talking.

1. The Church needs to address history and to actively listen to the emotions that are being expressed
2. The Church needs to address the fact that the Christian faith has been distorted to dehumanise some of God's children
3. The Church needs to repent and seek reconciliation with its brothers and sister of colour

In 2006, Rowan Williams speaking at the General Synod of the Church of England, said:

"The Body of Christ is not just a body that exists at any one time; it exists across history, and we therefore share the shame and the sinfulness of our predecessors, and part of what we can do, with them and for them in the Body of Christ, is prayerful acknowledgment of the failure that is part of us, not just of some distant 'them'.

"To speak here of repentance and apology is not words alone; it is part of our witness to the Gospel, to a world that needs to hear that the past must be faced and healed and cannot be ignored ... by doing so we are actually discharging our responsibility to preach good news, not simply to look backwards in awkwardness and embarrassment, but to speak of the freedom we are given to face ourselves, including the unacceptable regions of ... our history."[17]

In this profound speech, Rowan Williams reminds us that if we profess faith in Jesus then we are *all* part of the Body of Christ. We are *all* connected across history and time, and whatever pain the body endured then, it can still hurt us now.[18] I believe this is significant, and just as the Church has begun to face its demons regarding historic safeguarding issues, giving space for victims to share their stories of trauma and to be heard and vindicated, so too should the church be willing to hear the voices of those who are still impacted, not just by the horrors experienced by their ancestors, but also by the ongoing legacy of systemic racism that affects their daily lives.
St Paul tells us that God put the body together and therefore we need to treat each part with honour and dignity [19] but the church needs to acknowledge that this has not always happened and be willing to face those dark parts of its history with the same humility as it did with the child abuse cases. It was only when the voices were heard that healing began to happen and likewise, from the comments made by my respondents, what is needed and being asked for, is an open dialogue. This will be painful for both parties. Barton comments on how some people find it too difficult to speak of the stories of racism because of the pain it brings up[20] so care needs to be taken to ensure safe spaces are offered. At St Agnes, we provided a space after a local stabbing, and hundreds attended. Many spoke of the numbness they felt, about the despair and lack of hope, and a man in his 60s told us he was tired of sharing his story because it fell on deaf ears. People are tired of hearing 'sorry' without any significant change. What we need, as Anthony Reddie once said in an online webinar, is a theology of *action* not just a theology of *intention*. Rowan Williams

[17] (https://www.churchofengland.org/church-and-legacy-slavery 19/06/2020)

[18] 1 Corinthians 12:26
[19] 1 Corinthians 12:24
[20] Mukti Barton, 2005, 36

acknowledges that words are not sufficient, and that action is crucial[21] and for France-Williams 'an apology without action is manipulation'. [22]

And this brings me to the second key area raised, namely that the church has been guilty of using the bible to manipulate and to exert power and control over black people for centuries. Indeed, we know that missionaries developed a 'Slave Bible' in 1808 which contained only 10% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament so that slaves were encouraged to be subservient and loyal to their masters. All references from Exodus of the freedom of Israel were removed.[23] This is a huge challenge for the church and for the gospel. How *can* we speak of God when our listeners are suspicious and wary of a system that has abused scripture and then claims that this same scripture can bring freedom from oppression and captivity. How *can* we speak of God and claim that all are made in the image of God when God is so often portrayed as a white man, and many have been treated as less than because of the colour of their skin. How *can* we speak of God and tell people that Jesus came to bring life in all its fulness, when the statistics show us that a disproportionate number of black men are in prison[24], that more black women die in childbirth,[25] and more black children are excluded from school.[26] The message does not compute with the reality and for many this disparity is a huge barrier.

Willie Jennings, the Black American theologian, comments that most of the theology we are taught is euro-centric, with the impression given that it was the white people who took the gospel to the Caribbean and Africa,[27] when the reality is that the Christian faith already existed in Africa[28]. This highlights another crucial point: we need to be willing to learn from Black theologians and academics who have spent time reflecting and researching Christianity in relation to the slave trade and systemic racism. They have not just looked at this from an abstract point of view, but from a deeply personal and invested perspective. They have experienced the pain and shame of racism and yet have found a suffering Christ in scripture who identifies with the lost, the marginalised and the ridiculed. James Cone states that 'it is the encounter of the truth of black experience that enables black theologians to know that they must speak truth to the people' (Cone, 1975,28). When black people tell stories and sing their songs of lament, they are dealing not just with their own story but something that is beyond themselves. They see Jesus, and his life reflected in their own. We do the church a disservice when we inhibit these voices from speaking into scripture for us and showing us what it means for God to set the captive free. The problem, however, is that this needs affirmative action; a willingness to share power around the table with those who have for too long been seen as less than. I wonder how willing the church is to do this.

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[21] https://www.churchofengland.org/church-and-legacy-slavery 19/06/2020)
[22] Ghost Ship, 2020, 83
[23]Guy Hewitt, Church Times, 3 March 2023 https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/3-march/comment/opinion/slavery-has-cast-a-long-shadow
[24] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/number-of-arrests/latest/
[25] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-59248345
[26] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/black-caribbean-schoolgirls-excluded-school-b2492208.html
[27] After the Flood - - a film by Ministry of Justice and Reconciliation 2022
[28] Acts 8:26 shows the apostle Philip speaking to an Ethiopian eunuch.

Thus, looking back on the church's history and listening to the many voices who not only share the trauma of that history, but who also speak theologically into it, we come to the final key area which is repentance and reconciliation.
Repentance, according to Wikipedia, is 'reviewing one's actions and feeling contrition or regret for past wrongs, which is accompanied by commitment to and actual actions that show and prove a change for the better'[29] In other words, repentance is active. Saying sorry, showing contrition, is not enough, but instead, what is required, is an active turning away from those things that caused hurt and actively seeking ways to improve matters. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus and asked to visit his house, Zacchaeus felt honoured and humbled to be noticed.[30] In Jesus' presence Zacchaeus became convicted of his wrongdoings and repented. But he also changed his behaviour; he gave back, not just all he had stolen, but more, and in doing so he gave back people's dignity and self-worth. He gave them the means to live self-sufficiently and to flourish.

In 2023 the Church Commissioners published a report which recognised the link between the Church and the African chattel enslavement and pledged to allocate £100 million to promote the human flourishing for those affected by this history.[31] It also committed to working in partnership with those who had expertise in the area and who understood the true impact of racism on the world today. For this Oversight Group, Isaiah 58:6-13 underlies all that they hope to achieve – 'to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free..'.[32]

Jesus had the same ambition. He came to reconcile us to God and to show us how to be reconciled to each other. He came that all may have life in all its fulness and to flourish, to fulfil the potential that has been placed in each of us. If we are to speak of God in the light of the church's involvement with the African chattel enslavement, then we need to face our painful stories and grow through them with humility and determination. If we can do this then we ourselves will become part of a story of redemption and grace.

[29]Wikipedia quoting Jeremiah Unterman (2017). Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics. University of Nebraska Press.
p. 109.https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repentance#:~:text=Repentance%20is%20reviewing%20one's%20actions,a%20change%20for%20the%20better.
[30] Luke 19:1-10
[31]https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/repair+healing+and+justice/QgrcJHsHsJSbqLFJZFnPxWMSrrkdGjXwbwb?projector=1&messagePartId=0.1
[32] Isaiah 58:6

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Mary Rolls

How do we speak about God with those spiritually seeking through the practice of Mindfulness?

How do we speak about God with those spiritually seeking through the practice of Mindfulness?

An essay submitted by Rev Mary Rolls for the Clergy Consultation

God: Some Conversations, July 24

College of St George, Windsor Castle

We are living through a significant cultural moment in which people around us are increasingly open to and seeking spiritual experience, but are unlikely to look to the Church for this. As Christians, we know the living God who people are looking to experience. How do we enter into conversations with people who are spiritually seeking, in order to introduce them to Jesus?

Mindfulness is a practice which has gained popularity over recent years and is widely affirmed by secular organisations. What is the crossover between mindfulness and Christian meditation and contemplative prayer? Does this offer Christians a missional point of connection with our culture? What can we contribute to this conversation, and how might we speak about God in it?

This study is borne out of my experience of recognising and experimenting in a missional opportunity as the Covid lockdown restrictions eased. I observed through friends, family and local contacts that of all key workers I came across, it was those in education who had multiple, regular and sustained changes in professional practice throughout the pandemic. For them, these changes became a threat for their ongoing positive mental health.

All key workers had triggers for their mental health during this time, as they continued to work in high pressure, constantly changing, and extremely stressful conditions. Nationally, there was a rapidly evolving picture as the nature of the infection, how to treat it and how to protect people from it emerged. All key workers experienced major changes to their professional practice. These changes were sudden and out of their control. However, compared to healthcare, which appeared to have one major shift in working pattern at the beginning of the pandemic, those in schools had regular and sustained changes over a period of time. Teachers firstly moved quickly to teaching online when pupils were home schooled. This was a hybrid of teaching key worker children in classrooms and online with those at home, being expected by Ofsted to maintain the normal teaching standards of a classroom. As lockdown restrictions eased and schools were allowed to open, classes were in ‘bubbles’. One case of covid could shift the whole class back home. Famously, the education minister declared a new change in practice on the Friday as teachers broke up for a well deserved holiday. This meant that the break, which should

have been spent recovering from the stresses of the previous half term, would now be spent getting ready for the changes for the second half of the Christmas term.

From these observations, it appeared to me that the welfare of schools staff was the most threatened of all major key workers.

I started to discern a potential missional and pastoral opportunity to offer local schools pastoral support with their staff welfare; the Lord led in a couple of ways. Just prior to lockdown, I'd attended a workshop with Andy Freeman of 'Space to Breathe'[1], a Christian charity involved in well being work. Andy advocates that Christians are experts in spirituality, and this is a space we should be confidently speaking into. This led me to thinking through that the skills required in facilitating contemplative prayer are actually the same as those for leading people in meditation, and so I started to offer 'mindfulness' sessions for staff welfare using contemplative prayer practices with the Christian language neutralised. A chance conversation at church reminded me that I already had a pre-ordination qualification as a work based coach, and so started to offer to local schools that if any staff needed a confidential and neutral one-to-one conversation about welfare I'd be happy to give time towards this.

From a missional perspective, I felt that by offering this space, it would attract those who are spiritually open, and that getting in the room with such people would give an opportunity to build a relationship, from which faith conversations might follow. Therefore offering mindfulness sessions was a means of being present with those spiritually searching through this means, hopefully enabling a conversation about God to start.

[1] https://spacetobreatheuk.com/ accessed 14th June 2024

We are in a cultural moment in which people are more spiritually open, but religiously cynical.

The evidence of spiritual openness is all around us; step into any high street book shop and there is a plethora of well being and mindfulness resources; books, colouring in, essential oils, games. Amazon currently has over 100,000 listings each for 'Wellbeing' and 'Mindfulness'[2].

Sheldrake defines spirituality as 'a sense that human life involves more than biology. As human beings, we are naturally driven by goals beyond physical satisfaction or mental supremacy to seek a deeper level of meaning and fulfilment'[3]. Personal meaning and fulfilment are threatened by employment insecurity and economic and political turmoil. These remove the factors needed for most people to flourish. The recent uncertainty of the pandemic, a cost of living crisis, conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza / Isreal and political leanings towards extremism across the globe may have removed old comforts and certainties, opening up an increased spiritual interest and openness in our prevailing culture.

This recent societal backdrop; coupled more broadly in the late 20th century with womens liberation and movements towards equalising the status of ethnic minorities; has led to the questioning of value systems and inherited religious and social identities, Sheldrake suggests[4]. This questioning of inherited religion, rather than accepting the teaching and practices of those gone before, has shifted the standing of the Church in our culture's understanding of spirituality. 'Many people no longer see traditional religion as an adequate channel for their spiritual quest and look for new sources of self-orientation'[5].

People are no longer looking towards Christianity or other religions for spiritual fulfilment. However, if the assertions of Augustine remain true, that '…our heart is restless until to

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[2] https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=mindfulness&crid=30TCB76UP84KI&sprefix=mindfulness%2Caps%2C110&ref=nb_sb_ss_pltr-xclick_2_11 accessed 14th June 2024

[3] Philip Sheldrake, *'Spirituality: a very short introduction'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2

[4] Sheldrake, *Spirituality,* 6

[5] Sheldrake, *Spirituality,* 6

rests in you…'[6], then those around us are still searching, just looking in different places. '"Spirituality" has become an alternative way of exploring the deepest self and the ultimate purpose of life'[7]. A contemporary understanding of spirituality therefore, is disconnected from tradition religions. People may be more spiritually open but at the same time religiously cynical.

[6] Karen E Smith '*Christian Spirituality*' (London: SCM press, 2007) 27

[7] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 6

How does the Church reconnect?

'Spirituality is widely understood as the experiential side of a religion or belief system'[8]. Therefore a missional point of reconnection for the Church is precisely in what people are looking for, namely, spiritual experience.

Sheldrake suggests that the spiritual pursuit has moved from outward directed authority to inner directed experience, which is seen as more reliable[9]. Social research affirms this cultural perception of the reliability of personal experience, particularly in our younger generations. Observation of Millennials and Gen Z suggests that they are more responsive to this, 'placing a value on the human experience and recognising that life is more than work'[10]. If people value and are looking for spiritual occurrences that will transform them in some way, this presents a door for the Gospel. Moynagh suggests that 'this upsurge of interest in 'experience' gives the church an unparalleled opportunity for its work of mission and evangelism'[11].

Research from within the Church also confirms this missional window presented by a desire for spiritual experience. The 'Talking Jesus' project seeks to establish the state of faith in the UK and the nature of conversations about faith with those outside the church. The research was first conducted in 2015 and repeated in 2022. It provides valuable insights into what non-Christians are receiving and responding to in evangelistic conversations. In terms of spiritual experience, '36% of non-Christians, having had a conversation with a Christian (and choosing to remain a non-Christian), are open to experiencing or encountering Jesus for themselves'[12].

Recognising this is a point of reconnection is a start, how might the Church engage in this sphere?

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[8] Ross Thompson '*Christian Spirituality*' (London: SCM Press, 2008), 112

[9] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 6.

[10] https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2024/02/8-things-expect-gen-z-coworker, accessed on 17th June 2024

[11] Rob Frost 'Evangelism beyond the fringes' in *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age,* ed. Stephen Croft (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 100

[12] Talking Jesus research report, https://talkingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Talking-Jesus-Report-A4-AUG-23-WEB.pdf accessed on 17th June 2024, 38

Firstly I want to suggest that Christians need to be bold to step into this space. Anyone who has been trained to lead others in worship and prayer has the basic toolkit to facilitate meditation for non-Christians. This was my realisation and experience when I started to offer mindfulness sessions for school students and staff. The skills I was employing were the same as those used in leading prayer. The question may be more to do with confidence about our qualification, or otherwise, to do this?

Andy Puddicombe is acknowledged through the platform of Ted talks as a 'mindfulness expert'[13]. He is an author and speaker and an ordained Buddhist having spent time studying meditation practices at a Himalayan retreat. Following this definition, every ordained member of clergy is a spirituality expert, having spent time studying and practicing prayer!

Frost asserts that 'Christian spirituality is part of the Church's rich heritage and its roots go back deep into the Old Testament'[14]. We can confidently own this spiritual space through the wealth and diversity of our inherited contemplative prayer practices, we are qualified.

Therefore my conviction is that our culture is spiritually seeking, but not looking to the Church as a relevant place for spiritual experience. Christian leaders have the skills through leading worship and prayer to facilitate space for divine encounter. A point of connection of the two may be through the practice of mindfulness.

Before we look at how we might speak about God to those who are spiritually seeking through the practice of mindfulness, we must first define it.

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[13] Ted talk on mindfulness 'All it takes is 10 mindful minutes' by Andy Puddicombe, https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes accessed on Weds 5th June 2024

[14] Frost, 'Evangelism beyond the fringes', 116.

What is Mindfulness?

The NHS defines mindfulness as 'paying attention to what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment'. Mindfulness helps mental well being because 'becoming more aware of the present moment can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better'[15].

Mindfulness correlates to well being by being part of a suite of 5 steps, reported by the New Economics Foundation, as being core to well being. Well being is 'feeling good and functioning well', and is an umbrella under which mindfulness sits. This is alongside connecting with people, learning, giving and being physically active[16]. These '5 steps to well being' are widely acknowledged by the NHS and mental health charities as the gold standard for developing emotional and mental flourishing.

Mindfulness originates from a combination of Buddhist meditation techniques and cognitive behavioural therapy, developed through the work of clinical scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn and psychologists from Oxford, Cambridge and Canada. It has gained mainstream traction through Oxford Professor of Psychology & ordained Anglican priest Mark Williams, who authored 'Mindfulness - a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world[17].

There is also correlation between mindfulness and contemplative prayer practices. Stead suggests that 'Christians have been using the same techniques that mindfulness employs for centuries … even if it is not explicitly Christian, it is entirely compatible with Christian spirituality[18].

Do mindfulness and prayer intersect? The 'Mind UK' mental health charity instructs practicing 'mindful meditation' by 'sitting quietly to focus on your breathing, thoughts, sensations in your body or things you can sense around you. Try to bring your attention

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[15] NHS definition of mindfulness, https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/ accessed on Weds 5th June 2024

[16] 'Five ways to wellbeing' report from the New Economics Foundation, https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf, accessed 14th June 2024

[17] Tim Stead, *Mindfulness and Prayer* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2016), 4-5

[18] Stead, *Mindfulness and Prayer,* 10

back to the present if your mind starts to wander'[19]. Anyone who has practised centring prayer, breath prayer or silent prayer, will recognise from Mind's definition, that this is the starting place of entering into and returning to the divine presence.

Therefore the prevailing appetite for well being, and popularity of mindfulness, offers Christians a point of connection and commonality with our culture. There is something in the current zeitgeist of spiritually open but religiously questioning that can connect those hungry for spiritual experience through mindfulness to the deeper truths that Christian contemplative prayer practices can reveal of Jesus Christ.

Does this have the potential to become a conversation about God?

[19] Mind UK definition of mindful meditation, https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/mindfulness/mindfulness-exercises-tips/ accessed on Weds 5th June 2024.

Minding the gap

The gap between mindfulness and Christian meditation or contemplative prayer is the direction of orientation. Contemplative prayer is expressly focussed towards the divine presence and person of Christ. Mindfulness potentially opens a spiritual space, but without pointing this to anywhere or anyone in particular. In the course of the well being and mindfulness sessions I've facilitated, I've come to the conclusion that using neutral language feels inadequate and insufficient.

Why is this?

Thompson warns that 'without a framework of interpretation, spiritual experience is certainly impoverished'[20]. Non-Christians do not have a biblical scaffold with which to assimilate their encounters. There is no flesh on the bones because there are no bones.

Sheldrake suggests there is a communal as well as a personal consequence to contemporary spirituality's lack of connection to a faith basis. 'There are certain dangers in the taste for optional spiritualities detached from tradition and beliefs. Such fluid spiritualities tend to bypass issues of commitment - which, for some people, is part of their attraction but is also one of their weaknesses in relations to a wider human good'[21]. It is precisely in our mutual commitment to each other in the family of faith, through good and bad, that our spirits and souls grow and flourish in God.

Christian meditation differs because it provides a framework upon which to build faith and discipleship. This form of contemplation is deep communion with the Holy Trinity, which cannot be anything less than transformational. Foster describes that 'what happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart'[22]. In reflecting, ruminating and dwelling in God's words, Jesus' works, and the Spirit's revelation of our lives in light of his, we change and adapt our behaviour as a result of encountering the living Lord. 'It is this continual focus

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[20] Thompson, *Christian Spirituality,* 121

[21] Sheldrake, *Spirituality,* 99

[22] Richard Foster '*Celebration of Discipline - the path to spiritual growth*' (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008), 24

upon obedience and faithfulness that most clearly distinguishes Christian meditation from its Eastern and secular counterparts'[23].

For this to be the spiritual experience that people are searching for, Jesus needs to be named and acknowledged. Prayer is more likely to offer the desired spiritual experience. At what point do we need to proclaim the name of Christ for this to be authentically mission?

Smith highlights the relationship between experience and belief. 'The sense of search, or desire, drives the conversation between belief and experience in the exploration of Christian spirituality'[24]. As people search for spiritual experience, and begin to build a scaffold of belief and doctrine, spirituality will develop as 'beliefs are examined in the light of experience of relationship with God'[25]. As our hearts search for encounters of God, developing a biblical basis of our faith increases our understanding of these experiences, and makes us hungry for more. The conversation about mindfulness is therefore a starting point to talk about belief in God, such that genuine Christian spirituality may develop, nurture and grow.

The mindfulness sessions have brought me into contact with people I wouldn't otherwise meet in the course of normal parish activity. These sessions have been a means of meeting and starting a conversation with people who are spiritually seeking, but not in the regular orbit of the church. The sessions haven't in and of themselves begun a conversation about God. But they have been a place to start. The next natural question for those that have appreciated the sessions is 'if you like this, why not try praying?'. From a missional perspective, therefore, they've opened a relationship from which the faith conversations may follow.

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[23] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 20

[24] Smith, *Christian Spirituality*, 16

[25] Smith, *Christian Spirituality*, 33

Conclusions

Therefore in answer to the question, ‘how do we speak about God with those spiritually seeking through the practice of Mindfulness?’, this practice gives Christians the opportunity to connect with a culture around us which is open to and seeking spiritual experience.

Mindfulness is the opening and start of a conversation about God, but not the conversation itself. We need to be bold to move on to talk about Jesus.

Christians undoubtedly have rich wisdom and experience to bring into the cultural conversation about mindfulness and wellbeing. We need to both recognise and be confident in the rich heritage of our contemplative prayer practices. Comparing mindfulness to contemplative prayer is like comparing a puddle to an ocean. However the one may be the bridge to the other. If we can introduce people around us to Christian meditation through mindfulness, we have the opportunity to introduce them to the living God whom they are ultimately seeking.

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Neil Shaw

Is the Church of England doomed to death? Discuss.

Is the Church of England doomed to death? Discuss.

I recognise the title of this paper is far from positive. However, I am interested in this subject for a whole host of reasons, personally, professionally and spiritually. The Church of England is the one I work for, where my spiritual life is fed from and whom I am employed by. It is the one I have dedicated myself to as a priest. I, along with many other priests and parishioners, keep asking myself; will there come a day, in the not-too-distant future, when the Church of England will be gone? Doomed to death? There is a growing sense that change is needed and many of us have been trained and ordained into an institution that is rapidly adapting to try and buck this trend of decline and ultimate death.

Statistically speaking, the Church is certainly decreasing in terms of communicant numbers and income. While we are continually told that growth is not measured by bums on seats, or by its finances, no one really believes that this is the case, including the bishops! The average attendance at a Church of England service is assessed on those in worship during October, for one or more services. The worshipping community in the Church of England was 1.7% of the population of the United Kingdom in 2022.[1] There were on average 556,000 adult worshippers in the church in that year and 87,000 children. This was down from 2009 where 867,000 adults and 211,000 children worshipped in that same year.[2] This is a drop of 311,000 adults (43.7%) and 124,000 for children (87.2%) which is worrying.

Looking at these statistics it appears the church is doomed to death because if these numbers keep heading in the same trajectory it will not take long for it to be gone. Decline is not confined to just Anglicans but many denominations as well. Most predominantly the Welsh Presbyterians, United Reformed, Church in Wales, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Church of Scotland, Baptists, Salvation Army and open Brethren. Those who are bucking this trend are the New Frontiers, Elim, FIEC, Redeemed Church of God and Vineyard churches. Those growing denominations were founded post 1900, while those pre-1900 are all in decline, except for Seventh Day Adventists.[3] The vast majority of growth is being experienced within the evangelical churches.

Questions over what needs to change have been asked both inside and outside of the church for many years. Is there a need to amend the structure or the style or even both these elements within the church? Likewise, does something else need to be amended or changed besides these two points?

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[1] https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf
[2] Ibid
[3] https://churchmodel.org.uk/2022/05/15/growth-decline-and-extinction-of-uk-churches/

As we turn our attention to the structure of the church, the traditional model has been for an incumbent to serve a particular parish, perhaps supported by retired clergy or curates (stipendiary or non). Some larger parishes have enjoyed several curates at one time. The ministry was covered by these priests and each parish enjoyed their own parish church. As the years have gone on, this has changed, with smaller parishes being combined with their neighbours. Also, with fewer worshippers, deployment of priests has naturally changed too because of the financial burden where parish share cannot be met and the diocese are unwilling or unable to support such parishes.

Many Dioceses have adapted to these changes by cutting the deployment of priests to parishes. This has resulted in many parishes being combined into bigger benefices with the intention that they can support themselves and pay for the priest. The financial burden to pay for a priest is not the only factor at play here. Church buildings are often very old and parishes need to maintain them. Of the 16,000 church buildings across the country, 12,500 are listed by Historic England which means repairs and redevelopment is incredibly difficult. [4]

New forms of ministry have erupted across many dioceses. Most notably in the Diocese of Truro. In their Diocesan Plan for 2024, they state that clergy will have more oversight roles, leading overseeing teams of both lay and ordained people. They state the following:

> "The majority of church communities are led by Local Ministers (both lay and ordained), with stipendiary priests in oversight roles, leading, enabling and ministering to groups of churches, communities and missional activities of different kinds."[5]

This development has caused many concerns for priests, especially those trained in traditional contexts and who have experienced only single church benefices and not this newer form of structured ministry. What then is the role of the clergy? In one sense, how can a decreasing worshipping community need so many priests to attend to their spiritual needs? Granted, the role of the parish priest goes beyond worship and includes participating in the wider community, from chaplains to alms-houses, governors of schools, involvement in local or district councils as chaplains, participating in events throughout their community and the national life. But there seems to be a need, in some respects, to dilute the role of the clergy to make the demands of the priesthood stretch further. This requires a revision of the role of the

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[4] https://www.churchofengland.org/about/our-churches#:~:text=We%20have%20over%2016%2C000%20church,are%20listed%20by%20Historic%20England

[5] https://trurodiocese.org.uk/resources/our-vision/diocesan-plan/

laity within the church to step up and take a more significant position within parishes. Such a shift is beginning to take hold in many dioceses. As I have said, most notably in Truro, but also in Lincoln where focal ministers are now being endorsed by the bishop's staff.

This is where the work Alison Milbank has raised serious questions about the role and responsibilities of parish priests. She is a firm advocate of the traditional role of the cleric; she argues that there is a need for us to reconsider the desperate necessity for parishes to have their own priests, to administer the sacraments and to be wholly committed to the parishes that they serve in. This argument was originally put forward in 'Save the Parish' (2010) written by Milbank with Andrew Davison and was revised post-Covid with 'The Once and Future Parish' (2023). In it she reflects on the state of the ecclesiology model and analyse our secular country, offering an encouragement to the traditional parish structure.[6]

The 'Save the Parish' movement founded by the Rev Marcus Walker concurs with Milbank that there is a great need for the parish to maintain its structure of deacons, priests and bishops, where the parish priest serves a given parish. 'Save the Parish' believes:

> "Chief among the treasures of the Church of England is its parish system: the church, embedded in communities across the nation, served by priests dwelling among the people they serve, resourcing the laity who come to hear "the pure Word of God preached and the sacraments duly ministered".[7]

While I think this argument is commendable, I fear that it is not practical or therefore, achievable. The irony with this is that both Marcus Walker and Alison Milbank do not serve in parishes that could be deemed conventional, with both serving collected parish communities as opposed to traditional Anglican parishes. (Alison is in a cathedral and Marcus is in a prominent London church). At a recent clergy conference, the Bishop of Lincoln argued that while this is all well and good for us to want this traditional structure of the parish, looking back with love and devotion to a bygone age, it has not worked in the past to evangelise our nation under this structure, hence, the situation that we find ourselves in today and the need to radically think differently in order to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to our land.

If we look for a moment at the structure of the liturgy in the traditional context, some may argue that it has become stale and even boring to our modern world. So

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[6] Milbank, 2023

[7] https://www.savetheparish.com

irrelevant to our normal life that it makes it pointless. Perhaps this is why some non-conformist churches have grown and developed with new forms of worshipping styles. Arguments over whether churches entertain (or need to entertain) has arisen, coupled with the increase in Cathedral worship and both points may support such an argument. Sam Wells asks the question 'how can I meet God for myself?' (Wells, 2008, 73). Wells argues that this is experienced in a Godly Play context which is beneficial both for adults and children alike. This structure enables people to engage in scripture, while allowing the individual to form their own hermeneutic to the text, therefore, bringing it alive in a new and creative fashion. It is worth noting that Wells is not arguing against traditional Anglican liturgy but makes a valid point for space, reflection and individualistic spiritual experience which appears to interest many people. Andrew Norman, Director of Ministry and Mission for the Diocese of Leeds in 'A Church Observed' (2018) comments that Anglican worship needs to be 'accessible' as time changes. He argues this is precisely what Cranmer did in Reformation England, by allowing Bibles to be placed in every church within the land, while worship was conducted in English and not Latin.[8]

While some of these points listed above may appear depressing, Hattie Williams, writing in the Church Times in May 2023 said that, though church numbers are in decline, those who still believe in God, in the afterlife, in heaven and hell, has remained quite constant since the 1980's.[9] The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell has also commented on more than one occasion that while there may be numerical decline, the mission and ministry of the church continues and that Anglicans are not to be concerned by these statistics. The challenge to bring the Good News of God should be embraced. This is supported by Sarah Coakley who quotes the Anglican spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill when she says, 'God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God'.[10] Donal Harrington argues something similar from the Roman Catholic perspective stating that many people these days are interested in the spiritual but not the religious, the spiritual considered as 'good' and the religious as 'bad'. Why he thinks this is the case, he does not say. What he does wisely argue is that the church needs to foster this 'positive' desire to bring people into the workings of the Spirit of God to meet this apparent hunger.[11] Perhaps there is a sociological dimension going on where we may believe what we wish to believe (which could be anything) if we do not force that belief upon anyone else a trait that the church cannot realistically embrace.

There are several authors who have written on the need for the Church of England to consider and reevaluate its current predicament and return to the basics of the faith

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[8] Norman, 2018, 320

[9] https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/19-may/news/uk/uk-belief-in-god-falls-report-finds

[10] Coakley, 2008, 9

[11] Harrington, 2015, 35

by considering again the calling of Jesus to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28. 19). One of these is John McGinley. He is an evangelical who argues that the church needs to take seriously the person of Jesus Christ and his mission, ministry, passion, death and resurrection before all else. (I doubt any Christian would think differently to this assessment, if I'm honest!). He also believes that the church needs to be wholly dependent on the Holy Spirit; confident in the Gospel of Christ, have disciple-making communities, a willingness to plant, a diverse leadership and a holy people who prioritise prayer. His attack on the "traditional" church context is clear.

> "Sadly, the spiritual temperature and the hearts of many of our churches are cold – people held captive by dry ritualism and clericalism that denies faithful Christians the life of all its fullness that Jesus promised us (John 10.10)" (McGinley; 2023, 46)

I do not think that anyone would disagree with McGinley in his assessment of the modern church. However, the way to implement such a sentiment may differ from parish to parish and priest to priest. Likewise, Andrew Norman argues change is needed considering our decline. We in the church cannot realistically remain the same. Though the Church of England was 'minted in the sixteenth century' and has 'now been exported', those nations which were part of the British Empire are now leading the way for the Anglican Communion in terms of development and faith.[12] He argues that identity within the church needs to focus on several points. These points are comparable to McGinley's. The heart of what Norman argues is that Anglicans need to take seriously the 'missional motivation' in our society.[13]

It is worth looking at the work of the occasional offices that priests administer within their parish. These, according to every priest I have spoken to, is a privilege and an honour to conduct. From baptisms to weddings and funerals, many feel a real connection to the community in which they are called to serve. In some regards it enlightens the parish and reconnects the church to the community and vice versa. As Edmund Newey wrote:

> "In the inconspicuous, everyday practice of funeral ministry, the priest is carrying out a task that is at the heart of the Church's ministry. Entering the home, he or she speaks of God's love in the reality of here and now. Inviting the newly bereaved into an unfamiliar building which points to another home, he or she speaks of hope in God's love in the mystery of there and then."[14]

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[12] Norman, 2018, 2

[13] Norman, 2018, 6

[14] Newey, 2008, 104 &105

Rowan Williams, writing when he was Archbishop of Canterbury said the following:

> "Priesthood in the Church of England is to do with the service of the space cleared by God; with the holding door into a place where damaged and confused humanity is able to move slowly into the room made available and understand that it is accompanied and heard in all its variety and unmanageability and emotional turmoil and spiritual uncertainty."[15]

Perhaps the speed of change within the church needs to go a bit slower. In a world of fast-paced change and development, maybe priests need to worry less and simply get on with their call to make Christ known to those whom they are sent to serve, without worrying that they haven't increased the electoral roll or sorted the finances within six months of arriving in a new parish. Stephen Cottrell has written helpfully on this by stating that parishes need to respond to the necessities of the people by serving them. We should not be asking 'how can we convert the people but how can I serve them? Questions of how we can get people to come to church are doomed to failure, along with questions of how we can get people to attend Alpha or Emmaus course.[16]

There is no easy solution to this sense of death, otherwise we would all be doing it already. There does appear to be some hope in some quarters of the church, if there is a willingness to develop in ways with a deep and lasting connection to the people it is called to serve. Naturally, there are parishes that will weather the development of the Church of England (and other denominations too) with little necessity to really change their ways. Others will need to radically develop in ways that they have not considered before. Fr. James Mallon, writing in the Roman Catholic Church, but with words which I think have huge significance to the Church of England, believes that whatever we do, whether by priests or the laity, the intention behind it needs to be one that draws all of us into a deeper understanding and communion with God. (The intention is the crucial factor in all of this. Others may call it authenticity). And our vision 'needs to be big'[17] What is apparent is that the death of the Church of England (and other denominations) will, I hope, lead to resurrection. The body will bear the marks of the death but will gloriously resurrect to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. This begins by meeting people where they are, as opposed to enforcing what we in the church want from them. As

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[15] Williams, 2008, 179
[16] Cottrell,2006, 63
[17] Mallon, 2014, 283

Cottrell says, it is asking what is going on in their lives as opposed to what can they do for us within the institution of the church.[18]

I recognise that the question I have asked is complicated to answer in any meaningful way. This paper certainly doesn't do it any justice. Further research needs to be carried out as to why the post-1900 denominations are doing well and perhaps further research into why Seventh Day Advents are as well! Along with questions regarding why traditional and catholic churches are not seeing much growth especially in the west. One answer to this may be such denominations are structured in a way that lend themselves to members having been born into them, thus fostering the faith is perhaps more embedded in their structures as opposed to outright evangelism. Whatever the answer, which as I state, is not straightforward or simple, the church is called to continue to reflect and pray, to think and to embrace change, not for the institution itself to grow but rather that people may understand who they are as loved children of God, saved and redeemed through Jesus Christ.

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Julie Willmot

'Abide with Me'
The persistent popularity and importance of church funerals in rural communities.

Windsor Castle
College of St George

St George's House

CLERGY CONSULTATION 1 – 11 JULY 2024

God: Some Conversations

HOW DO YOU SPEAK ABOUT GOD?

Participant: Revd Julie Willmot

ESSAY TITLE

‘Abide with Me’
The persistent popularity and importance of church funerals in rural communities.

Word Count 2998

Introduction

'The Church of England has over 16,000 churches[1] and 10,000 of them are in rural areas with 40% of those who attend church going to rural churches'[2] These may be situated at the centre of a village community or on the periphery, often with populations that are smaller, with minimal transport links and large distances to be covered to reach amenities and public services. Although defined as 'rural' all will no doubt be demographically and geographically different and face a variety of challenges. Whilst some members of the parish will be church congregants, the vast majority may not and equally may not understand the Church of England parish system that provides *the cure of souls* for everyone in every parish.

When I moved from an urban to a rural area this brought with it a new understanding, that despite a low percentage of a village population attending Sunday worship, many in the community value the church building, its history and its presence in the community.

Life events are the most common point of contact when connecting with a Church of England church and its ministers[3] and this would appear to be especially evident in rural communities with church funerals persistently popular for both congregants and non-congregants.

This paper will look at:

- Why does the church building and churchyard remain important to rural communities.
- What draws the community to the church building to mourn the death of a loved one.
- How we speak about God in this mission opportunity.

[1] THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, *https://www.churchofengland.org/about/our-churches, accessed 01/06/24.*

[2] THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, Resources, Rural Mission, *https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/rural-mission accessed 29/05/24.*

[3] THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, *9 Dot Research: Funerals and Bereavement Research, 2021, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/funerals-and-bereavement-summary-report-web.pdf accessed 07/06/24*

Bereavement and Grief - 'Abide with Me'

The five stages of grief model developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross are described as *denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.*[4] These stages do not manifest themselves within a particular timeframe or order,[5] grief is personal and felt to varying degrees by the individual. However, a funeral is likely to occur early in the stages of grief when feelings of disbelief, shock and denial are heightened. For some the future can appear fragile and uncertain with the addition of mundane or urgent tasks needing to be addressed. Those grieving may immerse themselves in the necessity for planning and yet not know where to begin. Some look for space and time to process their thoughts alone, whilst others actively seek networks and agencies of support.

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 challenged the bereaved to navigate their grief without familiar social interactions. Funerals and their rituals are normally part of the grieving process, where memories are shared within a circle of support. Carr illustrates that, 'Socially, those experiencing grief are able to find consolation through the community coming together in support.'[6] When churches remained closed, the absence of the church 'space' added to their psychological experience of loss. The absence of a community gathered around them, within the community where they lived and without access to the church that had been visible for centuries, all contributed to the lack of opportunity to interact, provide solace and verbalise shared experiences.

'Abiding' with the bereaved was also difficult during Covid-19. The 'face' of the church was absent, no in-person visits were permitted, telephone or Zoom contact preceded the funeral service where there was the barrier to a visible expression of compassion in the form of a face covering. Without the familial range of support, the bereaved felt their grief wasn't addressed, their loved one didn't receive the acknowledgement deserved, and essentially, they were grieving in isolation. Carr writes: 'Because of the emotional dislocation … people remember

[4] CRUSE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT, *Understanding Grief, https://www.cruse.org.uk/understanding-grief/effects-of-grief/five-stages-of-grief/, accessed 08/06/24.*

[5] CHADWICK C & TOVEY P, *How to Prepare and Conduct a Funeral W221, Grove Books Ltd., Cambridge, 2014, p5.*

[6] LENSING V, *Grief Support: The Role of Funeral Service*, "Journal of Loss and Trauma", Vol.6, 2001, p49.

demeanour and attitude more than content.'[7] It was essential during Covid-19 that every element of funeral ministry had to be reimagined.

Music is influential and integral at many funerals whether in church or elsewhere with families heavily involved in the selection. Their choices often relate to their loved one's identity and preferences, together with reference to the impact of a particular piece on their own emotions.

'Abide with me' wrote the author and clergyman Henry Francis Lyte (Image[8]) in 1847 as the words were formed into the hymn that would be sung for the first time at the memorial service following his death and which today is still popular for funerals and in secular settings. The final line '… in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me'[9] lean into Lyte's prayerful plea for God to be with him, in life and in his approaching death.

His words may well have their roots in Luke 24: 29, where the two disciples are speaking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, initially not recognising him but when he moves to continue on his way, they encourage him to stay with them because the day is drawing to its end, 'Abide with me, fast falls the eventide'.[10] As churches and ministers we similarly walk alongside others and they with us. They may not recognise Jesus working through us on the journey, but we encourage them to rest a while and spend time with us. This might be working together when arranging a funeral or perhaps maintaining a pastoral presence in the future. Changing the emphasis to 'Abide with Me' could represent God's invitation to perhaps 'Abide with Him', in a house of God, where the helplessness of bereavement and grief is greeted with love, comfort and pastoral care. *"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11: 28*

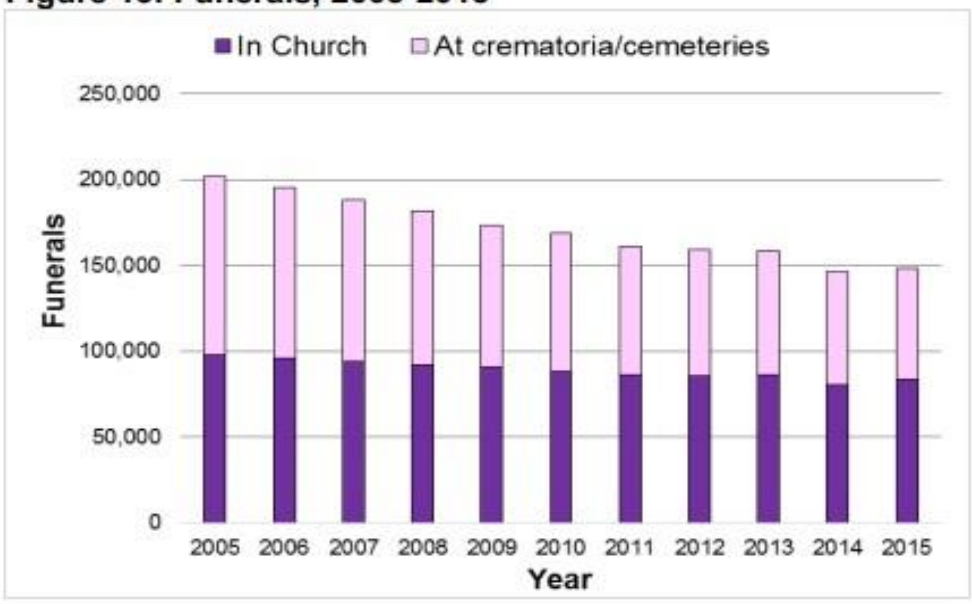
[7] WESLEY CARR, *Brief Encounters, Great Britain SPCK, 1985, p120.*
[8] HENRY FRANCIS LYTE, in *The Strand Magazine, vol. 9 (May 1895), p. 582*
[9] HENRY FRANCIS LYTE (1793-1847), *Hymns Old & New, Great Britain, 2004, No.2.*
[10] HENRY FRANCIS LYTE (1793-1847), *Hymns Old & New, Great Britain, 2004, No.2.*

Funeral Preference

Grief can hinder the ability to make decisions and the role of the funeral director and the officiant is important. When interviewing local funeral directors, they said that 10% of their clients opt for a church funeral, with 30% asking for a church minister to officiate at crematorium services. All the funeral directors ask whether the deceased was religious or not but only one indicated that they tried to *dig deeper* with families to discover whether they really understand the wishes of their loved one. This funeral director, although no longer a church attendee, knows her own CofE parish priest well, was raised within a Catholic family and understands what a church minister can provide. This, she feels, enables her to make informed enquiries professionally, pastorally and without bias. She also highlighted that through sensitive enquiry, people can often trace a connection with a church at some point in their loved one's life that questions their initial decision to choose a service at the crematorium. This seems pivotal in the decision-making process, did the deceased have any connection or relationship with a church at any point in their life?

The chart below shows the statistics for Church of England funerals in church and crematorium buildings for the period 2005 to 2015.

Figure 13: Funerals, 2005-2015



[11]

[11] CHURCH OF ENGLAND STATISTICS 2015, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/statistics-for-mission-2015.pdf, p13.

The following chart shows comparable figures for 2001 and more recent years before and after the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020.

Year	Total number of Church of England funerals	Funerals in church buildings	Funerals in crematoria
2001	227,900[12]	104,100	123,800
2019	114,000[13]	71,000	43,000
2022	103,500[14]	66,240	37,260

It is interesting that over a 21-year period, although the number of CofE funerals has reduced, a significant number of families choose to have the service in the church building as opposed to the crematorium, although these figures do not identify the number taking place in rural churches. From further local research the following contexts influence a person's decision to hold a funeral in a village church:

[12] CHURCH OF ENGLAND STATISTICS 2001 https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/church-statistics-2001.pdf, p7.
[13] CHURCH OF ENGLAND STATISTICS 2019 https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/2019StatisticsForMission.pdf, p9.
[14] CHURCH OF ENGLAND STATISTICS 2022 https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf, p14.

First contact is often via a funeral director's enquiry or occasionally, a telephone call from a bereaved family member, hopeful that their loved one might be 'allowed' to have a funeral service in church and be buried in the churchyard. Rural priests often minister across multiple parishes and if they don't know the person well, it is likely someone else in the congregation will. As can be seen from the above, connection and relationship are the primary drivers to contacting the church. Peterson reminds us of St Paul's emphasis on 'serving Him in a whole range of relationships and responsibilities.[15] A rural church congregation is immersed within the wider village community, where a small number of people may be involved in many activities, already witnessing to God's mission and ministry in the village through their attendance and witness.

Respect and Ritual

There is great respect around honouring the dead and in rural communities funerals can be attended in very large numbers. Within the farming network, there is a 'sense of duty' to attend funerals, especially those of other farmers. Many share an understanding that their elders would want their funeral to take place in church, even if this opinion had remained unspoken. They plan funerals in great detail and farming life will be strongly represented within the service and the coffin may be borne on a tractor and trailer. It is not uncommon to have milk churns by the door and wheat sheaves by the altar. Farmers are expectant and receptive to the traditions of the church and its liturgy, many do not discuss religion, but they do enjoy sharing memories and stories. Anderson and Foley highlight 'the great mystery of grief and sorrow that attend it requires rituals of storytelling and remembering'.[16] Farmers' lives align with the seasons and cycle of life, and they have an awareness of the many ways in which the stories of Jesus collide with and speak into their own experience of rural life.

Death within the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, 'as it does within many others, involves customs, rituals, beliefs and liturgical moments.[17] The funeral in church will see the building filled with women and children, so silently respectful you could hear a pin drop. Many will have travelled long distances to pay their respects and to grieve in community with others.

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[15] PETERSON DAVID, *Engaging With God – A biblical theology of worship, Apollos, England, 1992, p187.*

[16] ANDERSON, H and FOLEY, E, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, (viii), p97.*

[17] HORNE S, *Gypsies and Jesus – A Traveller Theology, Darton Longman and Todd Ltd., London, 2022, p206.*

For a lady's funeral the women will have spent the evening before lining the grave with flowers and yet on the day, other than close relatives, most of the men will remain outside the building. Their time will come when they personally take shovels in hand and fill the grave, into which they have already thrown their black ties, which are worn only once before the remembering and storytelling begins.

Good preparation with a family informs community trust in a minister, Ballard and Holmes state 'it is good pastoral care rooted in the Christian narrative which mediates grace, which 'proclaims Gospel'.[18] Within the church liturgy we have the opportunity to share biblical storytelling and when done sensitively, God can enter into their family story.

The Rural Community and the Church

In the 21st Century rural communities can include farmers, the active retired, elderly, families, single people, the housebound, travellers and those working from home. Holiday homeowners might visit periodically, commuters may only experience village life at weekends and school children may be driven in from other areas.

In rural parishes with smaller populations, congregations are likely to be a larger proportion of the population than those of more urban parishes. The congregation may already be involved in other groups active within the parish and they may personally know many parishioners. In more recent years rural parishes have appeared to also have a higher average age profile due to higher house prices.[19] In the absence of a pub, a shop or a school, in some smaller villages the church may be the only public building still open.

Generations of families relate to their village church through the life events of themselves and their community. Weddings, baptisms, and funerals are the welcome routes offered to priests as they build relationships with parishioners, with every age gathering to celebrate or mourn.

[18] BALLARD, P and HOLMES, SR, *The Bible in Pastoral Practice, London, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2005, p232.*

[19] OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, *Census 2021, Urban and Rural Trends, Recent trends in the housing market - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk), accessed 08/06/24*

Some who have moved away still feel connected with their childhood church, in the village where family still lives and where many generations are buried in the churchyard

Visitors' books and prayer requests evidence the numbers and emotions of those stepping through the door. The joys and sorrows of life enter our church 'space' with parishioners and visitors finding them to be places of peace, serenity and holiness, where they can sit a while and contemplate everything and nothing. The Christian legacy[20] seems to endure especially in rural communities, noticeably when parishioners look to the ministry of the church during bereavement and grief.

In the questionnaire (Appx 2) to parishioners who infrequently or never attend church, the responses illustrated the importance of the church and its churchyard:

- The church and churchyard bring villages together.
- The church on the hill looks down on the daily life of the village.
- A church is as reliable as the four seasons.
- It signifies reassurance.
- The church remains a constant in people's lives.
- Life has changed, there are so many distractions.
- It helped me in the grieving process to say goodbye to my mum in church.

- Those with no faith gravitate to the church.
- It's a place of worship that welcomes all faiths and none.
- Even though we don't attend church, it's comforting to know it's there.
- A place of quiet reflection and sanctuary.
- A place to sit and contemplate.
- A meeting place to share life events and woes.

Reassurance, stability, welcome, community and peaceful space appear to be the central themes from their comments. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are instructed, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'

[20] BILLINGS, A, *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts, SPCK, London, 2004, p19.*

Hebrews 13:2. As ministers and congregations, we listen to individual and unique stories in a variety of situations, with an assortment of people. Lyall enthuses, 'it is good pastoral care rooted in the Christian narrative which mediates grace, which 'proclaims Gospel'.[21] The church building and churchyard offer sacred space that proclaims God is at the centre of the community. They are an integral part of the story of the village and the history of its inhabitants 'because they are places that hold meaning for people…. they can be places of reconciliation for communities.'[22]

Small rural churches demonstrate the third of The Five Marks of Mission in their *tending* of those in their community[23] with minimal resources. Simply providing a sacred space within which families can honour the deceased, share grief with others and gently acknowledge the movement of their loved one from their present to their past. This is a valuable mission opportunity to 'speak of God'.

Conclusion

A church and its churchyard are a lasting visible reminder of the story and spirituality of a rural community. Worshippers and visitors alike may be drawn to the church by the history or architecture, or as a place of prayer, peace and sanctuary. For others it may be the size of the building, location or ease of parking. The church is a public building which is open to all regardless of faith or personal circumstance.

Within rural communities there is a sense of belonging to the local church because it's 'our village church', they and their ancestors may have gathered there for centuries to mark pivotal moments in the rural year. Generations of families will have celebrated and mourned within its walls and although those same generations lie resting in the churchyard, that sacred space is often 'buzzing' with nature and wildlife, welcoming the living into the beauty of God's creation.

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[21] BALLARD, P and HOLMES, SR, *Lyall D, The Bible in Pastoral Practice, London, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2005, p232.*

[22] BETSON, M, *How Village Churches Thrive: Being the Heartbeat of the Community, Church House Publishing, London, 2022, p89-90.*

[23] MARTIN S, *Resourcing Rural Ministry, Practical Insights for Mission, The Bible Reading Fellowship, United Kingdom, 2015, p29.*

Having a *connection* to the church draws people to it and *relationship* encourages trust in all that the church represents. The church community is immersed in the seasons of the village and as St Paul reminded the Romans (12:15) we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. A small village rarely avoids the effects of collective grief amongst its number and as part of the community the rural church consoles and is consoled and responds to human need by loving service. This I feel is a root contributor to the persistent popularity of church funerals in rural communities.

'We often say about a moment of pastoral care that we have stood on holy ground, when we have been allowed to experience the depth of another's pain or been invited into the intimacy of very private fear or struggles of faith.
It is also possible to think about such times as entering into the arena of God-speak.'

Herbert Anderson [24]

[24] BALLARD, P and HOLMES, SR, *Anderson H, The Bible in Pastoral Practice, London, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2005, p209.*

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Appendix 1

31st May 2024

Dear Parishioner,

I am attending a Clergy Consultation in July and as part of the preparation I am writing an essay on:

'Abide with Me' - The persistent popularity and importance of church funerals in rural communities.

I'm interest in this topic because where I used to live in London, we experienced very few funerals in church, perhaps only one every few years, and yet here in our rural context, people often choose a church funeral regardless of whether they regularly attend church or not.

I'm hoping that you might be willing to help me with my research by participating in a survey. It is very short and should only take about 5 minutes to complete. Please be assured that participation is strictly voluntary.

If you choose to participate in this survey, please answer the questions as honestly as possible. You also do not have to answer individual questions you do not want to answer. Your name will not be attached to the survey and I will ensure that your participation remains confidential.

Your responses may be included in the essay I will write, however, your responses would be anonymous and nobody could connect your responses with you as an individual.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx or telephone xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

Thank you.

Revd xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Appendix 2

Questionnaire for Parishioners

1. Do you consider yourself to have a Christian faith? Please circle: Yes No Unsure

2. Describe the significance of a village church and its churchyard within rural communities?

3. Describe what having a village church means to you personally?

4. Why did you choose a church for the funeral of your loved one?

5. How often do you visit a churchyard/cemetery?

Please circle: Daily Weekly Monthly Every 6 months Less than this Never