God: Some Conversations

How do you speak about God?

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Beyond Policies: How Safeguarding Shapes the Church's Mission and Ministry

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Content Warning - Sensitive Topics

This paper addresses issues of safeguarding, abuse, and the Church's response to these concerns. Given the prevalence of abuse within communities, it is important to acknowledge that some readers may have experienced harm themselves or be affected by these topics in other ways.

The content discusses sensitive material that may be distressing for some. If you find the subject matter overwhelming, please feel free to step away or reach out for support.

This discussion is crucial for the Church's ongoing work in healing, justice, and love, and it is approached with care, respect, and a commitment to safeguarding the vulnerable. Please take care of yourself as you read.

Introduction

Safeguarding is often misunderstood as a compliance obligation - a matter of bureaucratic necessity, policy documentation, and legal conformity. Yet in the Church, safeguarding must be recognised as a theological mandate, emerging from the heart of Christian discipleship. It expresses the Church's vocation to love, to protect, and to uphold the inherent dignity of every human being, particularly those most vulnerable. As such, safeguarding is not an optional programme or external imposition; it is integral to the Church's identity, its witness, and its embodiment of the Gospel.

This paper explores safeguarding not merely as institutional duty but as a theological and ecclesiological priority. It asserts that safeguarding should be embedded in the Church's ethos, shaping its practices and culture in ways that bear witness to Christ's call to love our neighbour and seek the flourishing of all. Where the Church fosters safety, trust, and dignity, it becomes a truer sign of the Kingdom: a sanctuary of hope, justice, and healing.

The discussion is structured in four parts: First, the theological foundations of safeguarding are explored, grounded in Scripture and the nature of God's justice and mercy. Second, the relationship between safeguarding and the Church's mission is examined, with attention to its implications for trust, credibility, and pastoral care. Third,

the paper calls for a cultural transformation, urging the Church to move beyond policy compliance towards an embedded safeguarding ethos. Finally, practical challenges are considered, with reflections on resistance, learning from past failings, and embracing safeguarding as a core expression of ecclesial life.

1. The Theological Foundations of Safeguarding

God's Concern for the Vulnerable: Biblical Foundations

The narrative of Scripture is replete with God's compassion for the vulnerable. Psalm 82:3-4 commands the faithful to "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Such exhortations are not peripheral but central to the divine character.

In the ministry of Christ, this divine concern takes flesh. At the inauguration of his public ministry, Jesus proclaims his mission to "bring good news to the poor... to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18-19). His identification with children, the marginalised, and the voiceless continues this trajectory: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones... it would be better... if a millstone were fastened around your neck" (Matthew 18:6). These texts make plain that safeguarding is not incidental to Christian life but a manifestation of divine love and justice.

Safeguarding as an Expression of Love and Justice

The command to love one's neighbour (Mark 12:31) is not abstract, but embodied in the active pursuit of justice, protection, and care. As Micah 6:8 reminds us, to walk with God is to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly." Safeguarding enacts this love in tangible form, ensuring the safety and dignity of those in our care.

Safeguarding is thus sacramental in character - an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It reveals the moral integrity of the Church and signals a commitment to the vulnerable as bearers of God's image. A failure to safeguard is a failure to love as Christ loves.

The Church's Moral and Spiritual Responsibility

The Church is called to be a sanctuary - a place where all may find safety, healing, and hope. This calling demands more than legal compliance; it demands a community marked by compassion, humility, and accountability. As Paul exhorts: "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12).

Safeguarding is therefore an essential dimension of discipleship. It must be evident in pastoral relationships, worshipping life, and communal structures. To neglect safeguarding is to deny the Church's vocation to reflect the mercy and righteousness of God.

2. The Church's Mission and the Role of Safeguarding

A Credible Witness: Moral Authority and Public Perception

Safeguarding failures have caused immense harm and eroded the Church's moral credibility. When trust is broken, the Church's prophetic voice is muted. The words of Ezekiel 34:4 resound: "You have not strengthened the weak... you have not brought back the strayed." The shepherds of God's people are charged with the sacred duty of protection. When that duty is neglected, the Church mirrors these condemned leaders.

Conversely, a Church that safeguards faithfully demonstrates integrity and earns the trust of those it seeks to serve. It reclaims its voice as a credible witness to God's justice and compassion.

Mission and Trust: Enabling Evangelism and Pastoral Care

The proclamation of the Gospel depends upon trust. Without safety, there can be no deep encounter with the love of Christ. Paul's words to the Thessalonians capture this pastoral intimacy: "We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

A strong safeguarding culture undergirds this trust. It allows individuals to participate in the life of faith without fear of exploitation or harm. It supports genuine discipleship, spiritual growth, and relational authenticity.

A Safe Church as a Welcoming Church

Jesus' welcome extended to all, especially the marginalised: "Come to me, all you that are weary" (Matthew 11:28). The Church must mirror this invitation with sincerity. A

safeguarding culture is not merely a mechanism of protection but an architecture of hospitality. It dismantles barriers that exclude and enables the traumatised to find healing.

To be inclusive is to be attentive to harm and intentional in creating spaces of refuge. Pastoral integrity demands structures that uphold the worth of each person, ensuring that all may flourish in the body of Christ.

3. Moving Beyond Policies: A Culture of Safeguarding

From Compliance to Culture

Policies are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Safeguarding becomes transformative only when it is embedded in the Church's collective conscience. It must inform the rhythm of worship, the texture of relationships, and the ethos of ministry.

This cultural shift requires leadership that models safeguarding not as an obligation but as a vocation. It demands ongoing formation - in theological reflection, practical training, and spiritual discipline. Safeguarding must be second nature, part of the Church's DNA.

This culture is marked by attentiveness: to power, to vulnerability, to the voices that are often unheard. It is a culture of transparency and trust, where concerns are welcomed, and accountability is embraced.

When safeguarding is no longer a "task" but a "way of being," the Church becomes a place of radiant safety - a sign of God's Kingdom breaking into the world.

Leadership and Accountability: The Role of Clergy and Lay Leaders in Modelling Best Practice

The safeguarding culture of the Church is inextricably shaped by its leadership. Both ordained and lay leaders must embody safeguarding as a lived theological commitment, not merely a procedural obligation. Their conduct sets the tone for the whole ecclesial community.

Clergy, as spiritual shepherds, bear particular responsibility. Their moral integrity and visible commitment to safeguarding reflect their vocation to protect and nurture the flock entrusted to their care. It is not sufficient that clergy comply with safeguarding policies; they must champion them - prioritising them in conversations, setting clear expectations, and fostering accountability within their teams.

Likewise, lay leaders - though they may lack formal safeguarding oversight - occupy roles of trust and influence. Whether serving in youth groups, children's ministries, or pastoral teams, lay leaders participate in cultivating a Church culture that safeguards the vulnerable. Through modelling care, vigilance, and wise boundaries, they embody a discipleship that protects.

When leaders across the Church prioritise safeguarding in word and deed, they foster a community marked by trust, responsibility, and Christ-like care. Such leadership becomes sacramental, outward signs of an inward grace: the Church's commitment to love and justice.

Empowering Congregations: The Importance of Training, Awareness, and Open Conversations About Safeguarding

Safeguarding must be embedded in the Church's communal consciousness, not confined to policy documents. Every member of the Body of Christ shares in the call to protect the vulnerable. This shared vocation is nurtured through theological formation, practical training, and open conversation.

Training is a continual and communal endeavour. It must be regular, contextual, and reflective of the varied responsibilities across the Church. Those in direct contact with children, young people, and vulnerable adults require specialised knowledge, but all must grasp the essential principles: how to recognise harm, how to respond, and how to act in ways that honour the image of God in every person.

Furthermore, safeguarding must become part of the Church's shared language. When safeguarding is discussed openly - from the pulpit to PCC meetings to coffee mornings - it ceases to be taboo and becomes an expression of Christian love. Creating space for dialogue removes fear and fosters responsibility. A culture that normalises safeguarding conversations becomes a community where truth is spoken in love and concerns are raised without fear.

Such empowerment is ecclesial: it builds up the Body, ensuring that every part does its work (cf. Ephesians 4:16), so that all may flourish in safety.

Creating a Safeguarding-First Mindset: How Safeguarding Aligns with Pastoral Care and Discipleship

Safeguarding is not an administrative appendage to pastoral care and discipleship - it is foundational. If pastoral care is to reflect the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11), then safeguarding must be central to our care for others.

Pastoral relationships must be marked by safety, trust, and ethical integrity. Without this, care is compromised, and the image of God in the other is dishonoured. Safeguarding thus becomes a practical outworking of the Church's call to love - to love not in word or speech only, but in truth and action (1 John 3:18).

In discipleship, too, safeguarding is essential. To follow Christ is to follow the one who lifted up the outcast and welcomed the marginalised. Embedding safeguarding in discipleship practices forms Christians in the way of Christ, calling them to a spirituality that protects, includes, and honours vulnerability.

Safeguarding, then, is not ancillary to mission - it is mission. It reflects the Church's theological commitment to be a place where every person can grow in faith within a sanctuary of safety.

4. Practical Challenges and Lessons from Experience

Resistance and Misconceptions: Addressing Common Objections

Despite its centrality, safeguarding often faces resistance. Some perceive it as an administrative burden that obstructs ministry. Others assume their community is immune from risk, asserting, "it doesn't happen here." Both views are theological errors.

To regard safeguarding as a hindrance is to misunderstand its purpose. Safeguarding is not about restriction, but liberation - it enables relationships to flourish in safety. It is the structure that undergirds pastoral and missional work, ensuring that ministry is life-giving and not harmful.

Likewise, assuming that safeguarding is irrelevant in a particular context overlooks the universality of human vulnerability. Sin, brokenness, and abuse are not constrained by geography or demography. A theology of sin, combined with the lived experiences of victims and survivors, reminds us that safeguarding must be vigilant and ever-present, lest complacency give way to harm.

Churches must therefore repent of any attitude that minimises safeguarding and commit afresh to a gospel that protects the vulnerable as a sign of the Kingdom.

Lessons from Past Failures: The Harm to the Church's Mission

The wounds of past safeguarding failures are deep and enduring. They have not only damaged individuals but compromised the Church's witness to the gospel. When the Church has failed to respond justly, it has forfeited its moral authority and driven the vulnerable from its midst.

In the face of historical or non-current abuse, the Church has sometimes prioritised institutional preservation over justice. In doing so, it has become complicit in sin. The concealment of harm, the silencing of survivors, and the lack of accountability have marred the Church's calling to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6).

These failures are not simply ethical lapses; they are theological betrayals. They obscure the face of Christ in the Church. When the Church ceases to be a safe space, it undermines its sacramental role and becomes a stumbling block rather than a signpost to God.

The only faithful response is repentance, reform, and a renewed commitment to safeguarding as integral to the Church's life and mission. Healing and restoration begin with truth-telling, justice, and a culture in which every person knows they are safe and seen.

Encouraging Best Practice: Embedding Safeguarding Successfully

The path forward lies in transforming safeguarding from a compliance obligation into a communal and theological practice. Best practice arises not from ticking boxes but from cultivating habits of care, vigilance, and accountability.

Proactive safeguarding means training is continual, reporting mechanisms are clear, and policies are living documents, embedded in the Church's daily rhythms. It means designing ministry with safeguarding in mind, not as an afterthought.

Cultural transformation is essential. Safeguarding must be seen not as a burden but as a manifestation of grace. It becomes part of the Church's ecclesial identity - woven into its

worship, its governance, and its mission. This transformation requires leadership at all levels that is courageous, humble, and rooted in Christ.

Only when safeguarding becomes a theological and communal discipline will it truly shape the Church's future, allowing it to be both a refuge and a witness to the God who is love.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Safeguarding is a theological imperative. It flows from the Church's vocation to embody the love of God revealed in Christ - a love that sees, protects, and restores. When safeguarding is embedded in our ecclesiology and praxis, the Church becomes a place where trust is nurtured, the vulnerable are honoured, and justice is lived.

Clergy must lead this work with integrity, embodying safeguarding in both practice and proclamation. Their leadership creates the conditions for a safeguarding culture to grow. But this responsibility is shared by the whole Body of Christ.

Every ministry, from the altar to the foodbank, must reflect a safeguarding-first mindset. Safeguarding cannot be separated from mission; it *is* mission. The credibility of the Church's proclamation depends upon the integrity of its actions.

Let us therefore renew our commitment to safeguarding - not simply to satisfy policy, but to embody the gospel. May our churches be places where safety is not assumed but assured, and where every person - especially the vulnerable - can encounter the love and justice of God without fear.

MELANIE HARRINGTON-HAYNES

Confidence and the Articulation of Faith amongst Young People

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Introduction:

We minister within a steady hum of anxiety about the future of the Church. Will we have dwindled out in a matter of decades once the old-faithful have departed? If congregations in Church of England and Catholic churches continue to decline at their current rate, their congregations could collapse by 2062.[1] The focus of anxiety surrounding Church decline is often pointed towards young people, and specifically whether the church can continue to attract them to secure its future. Views outside the church have been pessimistic.[2] The pandemic and the closure of churches has increased the level of anxiety due to its impact on church attendance. Now 2019 has become the bar against which subsequent yearly church attendance numbers are repeatedly compared. Despite positive noises about increases in numbers, the Church of England has not as yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.[3] In 2024 Oxford Diocese, for example, reported that they were now at 84% of the 2019 level.[4] Parallel to the discourse on church decline, and anxiety over how to attract and retain young people, there is another strand of concern surrounding how Christians speak about God.[5]

Into this anxious uncertainty has come a new voice on Christianity and young people. In May 2025 Lamorna Ash published her book *Don't Forget We're Here Forever: A new generation's search for religion*. Her book is a personal exploration of her own journey to Christianity, but also interviews other young Christians in different settings to explore why young people today are turning to Christianity in an age of uncertainty.

This paper will bring together these current strands of discourse to explore confidence and the articulation of faith amongst young people today. The term 'young people' is not without its challenges.[6] For the purpose of this paper I will define young people as those between the ages of 16-30. In the first part of this paper I will take a closer look at Lamorna Ash's contribution, alongside the recent report *The Quiet Revival* and new research on young people and the church. The second part of the paper will take a more philosophical and ontological approach to support an argument that the way young people speak about God may be changing. The paper will argue that rather than viewing young people with uncertainty and anxiety, there is cause for optimism. A new metamodernist attitude to faith and Christianity amongst young people may uphold an unapologetic acceptance, and thus confidence, about how we speak of the mysteries of God.

New Research and Writing:

In her important 1994 book, *Religion in Britain since 1945; believing without belonging,* which looks at religiosity and secularization in Britain at the end of the twentieth century, the sociologist Grace Davie explained how her books had its origins in two Consultations held at St George's House, Windsor, in the early 1990s. These meetings were

[1] Lamorna Ash, *Don't Forget We're Here Forever*, (Bloomsbury, London, 2025), p.13
[2] Grace Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994), p. 121
[3] https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-england-attendance-rises-fourth-year
[4] October attendance 2024. https://oxford.anglican.org/october-attendance-2024.php
[5] Confidence: is this a problem for the church? Kingston Episcopal Area, re-imagine church zoom conversations this Tuesday 22 October 2024. The Reverend Canon Dr Jessica Martin "What is Theology For?" Lambeth Research Degrees in Theology Education Day Lecture, Tuesday 26th September 20223. The Theme of this clergy consultation is again indicative of this concern.
[6] Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945, p.121

on the theme of 'Believing without Belonging'.[7] Davie argued that although people did not see themselves as churchgoers, they still thought of themselves as religious on an individual level. In one section of the book Davie examines generational difference writing that, "older people have always been more religious than the young…It seems that belief in God, and specifically belief in a personal God, declines with every step down the age scale, as indeed do practice, prayer and moral conservatism."[8]

This paper will argue that things have changed since Davie made her conclusions. In the midst of our growing anxiety about the future of the church, there has been recent research about young people and churchgoing which offer positive news. In April a report was published by the Bible Society: *The Quiet Revival*.[9] The report showed that attendance amongst young people was growing. There was a caveat, however, that the growth was largely amongst men and in Catholic and Pentecostal churches – not the Church of England. It does, however, offer some interesting insights into young people today and their approach to Christianity. The report compares two weighted YouGov polls on churchgoing and Christianity, conducted online in 2018 and 2024, of 19,101 and 13,146 adults respectively. This was supplemented by fieldwork carried out between 4 November and 2 December 2024.[10]

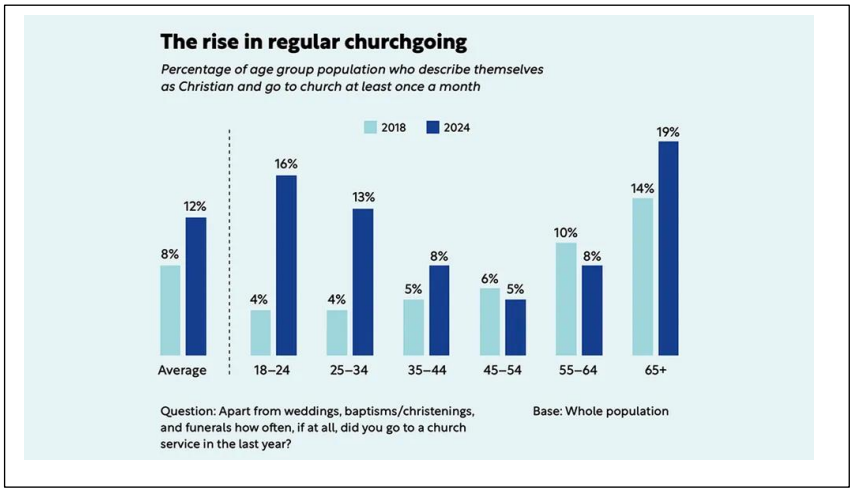

Table taken from: The Quiet Revival: Gen Z leads rise in church attendance https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/research/quiet-revival

The report found that 18-24 year olds were now the second most likely to attend church, with the least likely being 45-54 year olds: quite at odds with Davie's findings in the 1990s. It also suggests that the ""hostility" and "apathy" to Christianity recorded among older generations are consequently being replaced by "openness", particularly among Generation Z, who "show above-average levels of warmth to spirituality".[11] The report also states that almost one third of the 18-24 year olds said that they were curious to learn more about the Bible, "there is clear need for more discipleship around Scripture. Approximately one-third of churchgoers say they lack confidence in navigating or understanding the Bible and

[7] Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945, p. xiii
[8] Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945, p. 121
[9] R McAleer & R Barwood-Symmons, The Quiet Revival (Bible Society, 2025)
[10] https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/11-april/news/uk/
[11] The Quiet Revival

speaking about it with others." It was found that 19% of 18-24 year olds were reading the Bible weekly outside of church.[12] The report also notes a need for belonging amongst young people as a factor attracting them to Christian community and to the Bible. "With the normalisation of Christianity in culture, and the confidence and comfort of Christian friends to share their own faith experience, a large number of young adults now appear to be looking towards the Church as a space for finding healing and community as well as a deeper sense of meaning in their life."[13]

Ash's book *Don't Forget We're Here Forever* echoes many of the themes that appear in *The Quiet Revival*. Ash is herself a woman in her twenties newly drawn to Christianity. As part research/part personal exploration, Ash travelled across Britain to various Christian communities from Norfolk to the Inner Hebrides to meet young people and explore why they had turned to Christianity. Like *The Quiet Revival*'s findings, Ash associates her growing faith with interaction with scripture and a search for belonging, describing the need for 'something to hold onto, or, at least, the people I met during my research were seeking something to hold on to. I know I am looking for something like that'. She describes a deep longing to 'seek out some vertical axis by which to orient ourselves'.[14]

The Daily Telegraph recently featured an article on the resurgence of the Catholic faith in Britain and looked at the growing numbers of young people attending Catholic churches. They interviewed Fr Jim Conway of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, London, who holds a regular well-attended mass for young adults. Despite their attendance Conway noted that it was difficult to engage these young people in a deeper level of expressing their faith. "These young people are so strong in their faith, but the personal friendship with Jesus is a bit narrow," he said. "As one of them said to me, they don't have the bandwidth for more. That is our next challenge."[15]

My own experience of young people in my parishes is that they do have the necessary 'bandwidth', but seek greater interaction with the Bible as the basis of their faith. It seems there is a growing sense that scripture is for young people "the vertical axis" to hold onto amidst the uncertainties of life and the future. Despite a felt lack of knowing, they are more open and confident about speaking about what God means in their lives than many of the older adults.

The Quiet Revival highlights a similar change in confidence in how young people speak about God, discerning a:

> "notable shift in the cultural attitudes towards Christianity in the public eye. While the perception of Christianity among older generations may be defined or significantly influenced by the active hostility of 'new atheism' in the 2000s, this is no longer the dominant cultural narrative. Instead, it has shifted away from hostility to apathy and, eventually, to openness. Over the past decade we have seen not only intellectual figures advocating for the value of Christianity and scripture but also influential people across wider culture – from sport to music and social media – feeling comfortable talking about their faith to wider audiences."[16]

[12] The Quiet Revival
[13] The Quiet Revival
[14] Ash, *Don't Forget We're Here Forever,* p. 20.
[15] https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/16-may/features/features/interview-with-lamorna-ash-surprised-by-faith
[16] The Quiet Revival

A key moment in Ash's personal encounter with Christianity came during her time on a Christian retreat in Iona. The experience of the rhythm of worship and connection with scripture seemed to unlock something within her that relates to language and how we articulate faith.

> "On Iona I longed for our hours in the church like a hunger. The words in the prayer book felt to me like escape valves. Each verse we spoke in chorus, it was as if some new guilt or hurt was released from my body. I'd found a language for faith that I could let in. For the first time in a long while, I noticed I was having only one thought at a time. A few days in, I was not sick any more, my mood even and content."[17]

Doubt:

For Ash, finding this "language" to articulate her faith did not come through simple answers or rational arguments, but something transcendent and inexplicable, and something brought about through struggle and doubt. Ash offers a compelling re-write of the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, which underpins her whole book: her belief that it is only through wrestling with God that you can know God and speak of God. There seems to be a growing sense amongst young people that they can speak confidently about God whilst still wrestling with mystery and uncertainty.

On the importance of doubt, Ash says:

> "I think my generation is starting to question those black-and-white assumptions because we have grown up in a more pluralist and diverse world which (not always, but often) makes us more tolerant of those who have religious beliefs. Sometimes I think the prevailing mood of our generation is one of doubt: there is so little we can be certain about when it comes to our own future and the future of the planet. The New Atheists were not all that into doubt; everything seemed provable and understandable. Doubt is a more useful frame of mind in which to approach faith. [18]

As Angela Tilby has noted regarding Ash's book: "what she [Ash] found was not a faith that answered life's dilemmas, but a very different kind of engagement: one that gave space for doubt, rebellion, and ambiguity."[19]

For Ash the acceptance of doubt and a healthy wrestling with faith go hand in hand with a deeper more open engagement with scripture.

> "I think we should let young people engage with the Bible as they might with any other work of literature – let them wrestle with it. I think we need to take young people's intelligence and capacity to deal with challenging, complicated things very seriously.[20]

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[17] Ash, *Don't Forget We're Here Forever,* pp. 146-7. *https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/apr/20/dont-forget-were-here-forever-a-new-generations-search-for-religion-lamorna-ash*

[18] https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/lamorna-ash-the-progressive-writer-trying-to-become-a-christian/19461.article

[19] https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/25-april/comment/columnists/angela-tilby-young-people-are-drawn-to-doubt-and-struggle

[20] https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/lamorna-ash-the-progressive-writer-trying-to-become-a-christian/19461.article

Metamodernist challenge to the immanent frame:

An ontological and philosophical approach can help us further understand this change in how young people speak about God and view the church in 2025. In his book A *Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor put forward the philosophical concept of the immanent frame. [21]Anything which cannot be explained is outside the imminent frame and therefore off limits and outside reality. It rejects transcendence, and explains reality without recourse to religion, spirituality and God. The immanent frame thus makes God unbelievable.

In 2022 Andrew Root published the book *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*.[22] Within it he brought Karl Barth into dialogue with Charles Taylor's *Secular Age*, particularly regarding the immanent frame. Root highlighted the importance of challenging the fundamental presuppositions of the immanent frame which is closed to God. In a critique of modernism and the immanent frame he states that 'meaning, belonging, ritual, and even peace are not necessarily modernity's strong points. Its strength is explanation'. In church, the clergy are "stripped of importance and purpose when God is subordinate to explanations and the world is stripped of mystery."[23]

What Root suggests seems to support the argument that we are now moving into a new era of speaking about God which has broken the bounds of modernism, postmodernism and new atheism. A more nuanced metamodernist approach to speaking about God, now evident in how young people speak about God, seems to be more open, unapologetic, and comfortable in expressing mystery and doubt. Without those limitations, it speaks with a new unfettered confidence. The current age of uncertainty offers permission to be uncertain about God and speak of that uncertainty confidently.

Conclusion:

This paper has put forward the suggestion that rather than viewing young people with anxiety, the church has reason for optimism. The rejection of the immanent frame (and thus the unbelievability of God) and the embracing of doubt and mystery is engendering a new more confident way of speaking about God. A nuanced metamodernist approach towards faith and Christianity offers unapologetic acceptance of doubt and the mystery of God, and legitimises wonder and uncertainty in our conversations. Transcendence is no longer off-limits, and there is a new readiness to wrestle with the inexplicable. Ash's book and recent research such as *The Quiet Revival* suggest that young people are looking to share this together in community, and, dare I say it, in church. They are seeking a community of friendship as a forum for speaking about God and grappling with the Bible. The church can provide this space and this community. This research highlights a change in attitude since the 'belief without belonging' of the late twentieth century. Amongst young people we might now argue there is the dawning of a new era of 'belonging for belief', holding out a 'vertical axis to orient themselves', in an age of uncertainty.

[21] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard University Press, 2007)

[22] Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age* (Baker Academic, 2022).

[23] Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline,* pp. 57-8

Synopsis:
This paper argues that young people are beginning to present a new more nuanced approach to speaking about God which could be termed as metamodernist. No longer bound by the limits of modernism and the secular 'immanent frame' where everything had to be explained, they are embracing doubt and wrestling with the mystery of God. This openness to uncertainty elicits its own sense of *freedom* and *confidence* in speaking about God. It is argued that the church should be facilitating this new discourse and provide young people with community and the opportunity for deeper engagement with scripture. This essay bases its argument on recent literature and research on young people and Christianity today – whilst this research is limited and only at early stages, I would like to offer it for further discussion within the consultation and would welcome your views.

BARNABY HUISH

Can (or should) a Trinitarian Church avoid binary thinking?

Can (or should) a Trinitarian Church avoid binary thinking?

Barnaby Huish

Jesus Christ is non-binary: not in terms of his gender, but in terms of his divinity. The received wisdom was: *either* he is God *or* he is a human being; those are the only two conceivable possibilities. It is a binary[1] proposition: you must be either one thing or the other, you cannot possibly be both. And yet, 'we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God *and* Man [...] who although he be God and Man: yet he is not two, but one Christ'.[2] To many non-Christians (and indeed some Christians) at that time, this was blasphemy; yet we proclaim it as orthodoxy (and have done so for over 1,600 years).

The Church today (I write as a priest of the Church of England) can seem beset by binary thinking – especially where there is entrenched difference of opinion (around questions of same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, for example): there is a right way of thinking and a wrong way of thinking; nothing else is conceivable, and so people claim that their viewpoint, and theirs only, represents what is 'scriptual' or 'traditional' or 'reasonable'.

This is very much in tune with contemporary *secular* approaches to all kinds of questions; however, I contend that the Church should aspire to a different approach. It is, after all, only through embracing 'non-binary'[3] thinking that our core doctrines of the Nature of Christ and the Holy Trinity are conceivable. Could and should, therefore, 'non-binary' thinking guide and inform our approach to today's divisive questions?

The argument for 'non-binary' thinking can (and must) be made from Scripture, as well as from Tradition. In the teachings of Jesus it comes across succinctly in the Sermon on the Mount: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.[4] In the course of the Sermon, Jesus repeatedly challenges the 'binary' assumptions of the world by suggesting (among other things) that the poor are blessed, that the meek shall inherit the earth, and that violence need not be met with violence.

If we move to the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles, we find another example of 'non-binary' thinking (which was crucial to the shape and development of the Church as it has come down to us today): namely, the evangelisation not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles. In Acts 10, St Peter is directed by the Holy Spirit to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius (a Roman centurion, albeit a god-fearing one). There he declares 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean'.[5] Peter goes on to suggest that anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.

'The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and

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[1] "Binary (adj.): relating to or consisting of two things, in which everything is either one thing or the other" – *Cambridge English Dictionary* definition.
[2] Creed of S. Athanasius, *Book of Common Prayer 1662* [my italics].
[3] "Non-binary (adj.): not simply one thing or another" – *Cambridge English Dictionary* definition.
[4] Mt. 5:43-44 (NRSV)
[5] Acts 10:28 (NRSV)

extolling God'.[6] The received wisdom, understood by both Gentiles and Jews, is that Jews *do not* associate with Gentiles; but Peter does differently. Again we have a binary situation (either you are a Jew, or you are a Gentile: two absolute categories); which Peter (by the Holy Spirit) confounds with the 'non-binary' option of faith in Christ.

This is of course further developed by St Paul (whom we find with Barnabas, in the following chapter of the Book of Acts, discovering for themselves the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles of Antioch). He later writes to the Galatians: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'[7] We may want to take a moment to reflect on how (in our own time) a 'binary' understanding of the categories of 'male and female' is being strongly asserted,[8] amid lively and contentious debate; which may serve to illustrate quite how radical Paul's 'non-binary' understanding of these categories (in the light of Christ) is.

There are, though, further contemporary echoes to be discerned from this passage. When Paul says 'there is no longer Jew or Greek' he is breaking down the barriers between two very different (and, as we have already seen, separate) cultures: distinct in terms of all sorts of things – including sexual practices. In Greek culture the idea (and practice) of same-sex relationships was comparatively normalised, in stark contrast to the Jewish traditions of Paul and his contemporaries. (We should note in passing that the Greek ideal of same-sex relationship was categorically different to present-day norms).

That Paul's readers would have been aware of such cultural differences is evidenced in Romans chapter 1, where (in condemning 'those who by their wickedness suppress the truth'[9]), St Paul characterises – perhaps even caricatures – the Jewish view of the Greeks: 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. [...] God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another.'[10] So far, so 'binary'; and while he is on the subject of 'them' and 'their' doings (as opposed to 'us' and 'ours'), Paul adds for good measure: 'since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.'[11]

But then, having built up all that momentum against 'them', Paul declares to his faithful readers (in words seldom cited by those apt to quote Romans 1 in debates on sexuality): 'Therefore *you* have no excuse, whoever *you* are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, *because you, the judge, are doing the very same things*'[12] – a powerful and shocking assertion. He continues: 'You say, "We know that God's judgement on those who

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[6] Acts 10:43-44 (NRSV)
[7] Galatians 3:27-28 (NRSV)
[8] Exemplified in the 'Can a woman have a penis – yes or no?' question asked by journalists of politicians *passim* during the 2024 General Election.
[9] Romans 1:18 (NRSV)
[10] Romans 1: 22-23, 26-27 (NRSV)
[11] Romans 1:28-31
[12] Romans 2:1 (NRSV) *my italics*

do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgement of God?'[13] And so he builds up to a distinctively 'non-binary' conclusion in chapter 3: 'There is *no difference* between Jew and Gentile, for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and *all are justified* freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus'.[14]

I have sought to suggest that there is a strong 'non-binary' emphasis in the New Testament, both in the teachings of Jesus and in the acts of the apostles and in the writings of St Paul: all of whom took our inherited norms and logical assumptions, and then confounded them with the broader and deeper truth of Jesus Christ. As part of this process, I have touched on debates in our own time, both in contemporary society and in the contemporary Church. In doing so, I am not advocating for one side or another with regard to these debates (there is, in all of these debates, 'binary thinking' on both sides – as the phrase 'both sides' itself suggests). But I am suggesting that those of us on all sides in these debates should think twice before invoking 'them and us' language and arguments, (and before making presumptions about our own righteousness).

But what of the counter-argument? Are there not categories in Holy Scripture that *are* binary – inescapably so? A couple have been hinted at already in passages previously touched on. For example, Peter says in Acts 10: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation *the one who fears him and does what is right*': implying that God's acceptance is contingent on faith and righteousness. Similarly in Romans chapter 2 we read that 'There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality'.[15] There is no longer (in God's eyes) a binary separation between Jew and Greek; but there is between good and evil. This is bound to affect our approach to how and whether we engage with people with different views/opinions/lifestyles. Part of the difficulty of current debates within the church is that some people think we are debating around people's innate essence (equivalent to 'Jew or Greek', in Paul's terms?), while others think we are debating around people's chosen lifestyles ('evil' or 'good', in Paul's terms). Romans 1 & 2, of course, may be cautioning us in any case not to rush to judgement on such matters.

The title of this essay makes reference to the Holy Trinity (more specifically to being a 'Trinitarian Church').

This year happens to be the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), the first great Ecumenical Council of the Church. From Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) the Church formulated a creed which remains definitive for a significant majority of Christians. The creed as first formulated at Nicaea is a declaration of faith in God the Holy Trinity: a formulation which is, self-evidently, 'non-binary'.

(In the context of this paper, we ought to acknowledge that the creed as first promulgated at the Council of Nicaea encompassed not only a Trinitarian declaration of faith, but also a set of 'anathemas' (expressing very clearly a 'binary' division between acceptable and non-acceptable

[13] Romans 2:2-3 (NRSV)
[14] Romas 3:22-24 (NIV) *my italics*
[15] Romans 2:9-11 (NRSV)

interpretations);[16] albeit the 'anathemas' were short-lived and are largely forgotten, whereas the Nicene Creed (in its fuller form) is very much alive within the worship and doctrine of the Church.)

In their quest to understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the early Church Fathers settled upon terms such as *perichoresis* (often translated as 'mutual indwelling') and a concept that Aquinas (later) termed 'subsistent relations', in seeking to describe *both* how God is One *and* how God is Three. Augustine settled upon Love as the key characteristic (that both defines *and* unites the persons of the Trinity in Unity).

If we are created in God's image (individually and collectively), it follows that we must ourselves, likewise, be defined and united by 'subsistent relations' – inter-relationships which reveal who we are and make us who we are; characterised by Love. Within the Church (at the very least) we should expect and be prepared to engage with one another by and through some sort of 'mutual indwelling' or *perichoresis*. This for me is a key reason why the Church needs to find ways to avoid 'binary' assumptions, and instead seek to engage in a more theologically-rooted way, in its debates and disagreements.

What, finally, has Reason to say in this matter? If we look to secular society, it seems (by my observation) that binary thinking holds the upper hand: in matters of dispute and disagreement there is far more often a rush to condemn than an eagerness to understand. Looking at the Church, I tend to see the same picture. (This is not invariably the case; for instance, the *'indaba'* approach intentionally adopted for the 2008 Lambeth Conference represented, I think, a concerted effort to avoid binary thinking).

It is not all together surprising that a default dependence on binary thinking should be the norm: both within the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in wider contemporary society there is a strong history of, tendency towards and contentment with binary thinking (we can find ourselves very comfortable within our 'silos'). It may indeed be that to be human *is* to be 'binary'. (Even the avowedly non-binary 'trans' community, as publicly represented, appears to define itself very much in contradistinction to the 'cis' community; and so to have created a whole new binary separation where there might have been something more innovative).

Nevertheless, I hope in this paper to have presented the idea that Christ exemplifies a different approach (which, through the working of the Holy Spirit, was also taken up by the early apostles and the early Church), which percolates through the New Testament and finds its way into Christian doctrine: an approach which often confounds our human logic and expectations. My contention is that this 'non-binary' approach, if acknowledged, cannot then be ignored as we seek to conduct ourselves (including in our disagreements) in the Way of Christ.

[16] "But as for those who say, There was when he was not, and, Before being born he was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematises".

Aonghus Mayes

Death is a Mystery

Death is a mystery

Death is a mystery, and increasingly so. At the beginning of the twentieth century fewer than 15% of all deaths occurred in a hospital or nursing home. People tended to die in their own homes surrounded by those they loved. Now, with better healthcare, new treatments, immunisation programmes and other developments people's experience of illness has changed and offered the possibility of cure, or at least postponement of death, impossible in earlier generations. Yet these advances can only remediate to a point. The deathrate remains at 100%. What has changed is the familiarity we once had with that process.[1] Clergy, of all people however, should be aware of death's powerful reality: funerals are part of our daily lot, the bereaved and the dying are our daily care and our registers remind us that despite all of our advances the average lifespan is not all that far beyond the Psalmist's three score years and ten. And yet had it not been for a conversation I had with a parishioner back in March who has terminal cancer I too might have avoided the subject. In the ensuing six weeks, I had to preach at a number of very difficult funerals, one of a teenager, another of a lady in her early twenties. The words of the old prayer book seemed more pointed than ever, 'In the midst of life we are in death, to whom can we turn for help, but only to you O Lord.'

Death is a reality in our world and it refuses to be ignored. And yet in spite of this, there seems to be a strange conspiracy abroad where death is concerned, something which prevents us from considering it too seriously except when we are compelled to do so. Death is the one fact of life that nobody speaks about. The Victorians wallowed in death, but they abhorred any mention of sex. In our time, the pendulum has swung fully in the opposite direction. It is as if one cannot speak of the ultimate act of giving to a generation that wants to go on taking. And so it is that death is considered a morbid subject. It embarrasses us, so despite all of its reminders we pretend it isn't there. We avoid the very word itself. We speak of 'passing away' and 'no longer being with us.' We refer to the dead as the deceased or the departed and we frighten the life out of the ill at times by using those special hushed whispers outside their bedroom doors. And if we ever refer to ourselves in such a context all we can manage to say is 'if anything should happen to me'. We are utterly self-conscious about death and decay in every form.

As in the time of Jesus, we regard death as being in some way unclean and so we avoid it. Equally, we try to hide all ravages of time upon ourselves. We would not be so extreme as Jeremy Taylor[2], who suggested that baldness, failing sight, wrinkling skin and loss of teeth were all signs 'of a person entered very far into the regions of death,' but at the same time, few of us want to give the impression of being in the final furlong either! The words 'older' and 'wiser' no longer go together, for youth is the premium now and youthful image is everything. People spend a fortune on clothes, cosmetics and fitness in their search for this vital image as they cooperate with what is undoubtedly one of the greatest cults of our time – which is to persuade people they can be young and beautiful forever. Consciously or un-consciously we are all influenced by this approach and, except where death robs us of someone really close to us and we cannot avoid facing it, we pretend it isn't there – and yet it is there.[3]

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[1] Mannix, Kathryn, *With the End in Mind: How to live and die well*, London: William Collins, 2017, 1f

[2] Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), Bishop of Down & Connor (1661-67)

[3] Clergy themselves may acquiesce in this deception. For example, during the season of Advent, a time when people were traditionally presented with reminders of their own mortality as preachers focused on the four last things, we're afraid of the fire and brimstone label so nowadays few of us even speak of death itself. At funerals, there has been a growing tendency for eulogies and tributes and it is good that those closest have an opportunity to say a personal word of appreciation, but it should never replace the Christian message.

Our death is as certain as our birth. Parting is as inevitable as meeting; they are part of the same process. In a way every parting, every goodbye has something of death in it. And the greater the bond which that meeting has created between people, the greater will be the wound when parting eventually comes; they are two sides of the same coin. Bereavement, with all of its deep sorrow is part of loving. It is love with nowhere to go. In theory we realize this. We know that as a general rule, one in every couple must die before the other. Death must eventually separate us from every person no matter how close they are to us. And if we do not come to realize this then it is not surprising that death angers us, that we will not accept it, that it makes us feel cheated, causes us to sulk on God, and to lose all sense of joy and purpose in life.

That is not to say we can ever prepare ourselves adequately for death. In the end it is always a shock. As Thomas a Becket says in T.S. Elliot's play 'Murder in the Cathedral': "However certain our expectation, the moment foreseen may be unexpected when it arrives. It comes when we are engrossed in matters of other urgency."[4] There is always a sense of being unprepared, of isolation and helplessness, of things that might have been done. The senses are numbed. We seem so powerless. Even our ability to pray is stifled at the very time we need it most and it is then that we need the prayers of others to carry us on a tide of spiritual energy. The bereaved take a step back from life and seem to view it all from a distance. And difficult as it may be, often simply being with someone is the best we can offer in such circumstances as words, especially those that may appear glib, are seldom the best response. Also, it is well worth noting at this point, it is often those who have suffered in like manner who can be a particular support. We're very used to hearing about bringing our time, and gifts and talents and offering them to God and using them for the comfort, the strengthening of others; I believe that is true of our troubles too. If we could only see them properly, and use them properly, they could be the greatest gift of all. It is the one who has suffered who is best equipped to understand suffering.

So far, I'm aware that I'm like the friends of Ivan Ilyich in the story by Tolstoy[5], I've been describing death in terms of THEM, and I'm in danger of assuming death will never touch my own life. We find it easier to anticipate the death of others than to come to terms with our own, with the fact that death will place a question mark after everything we have worked for, everything we have valued and everything that has divided us. To be in any position to serve those who are dying, or those who are bereaved, surely we should first come to terms with our own mortality, that ultimately we do not control our own destiny, realizing that our lease on life here is very brief, and that despite occasional repair jobs at the hospital our frail bodies are in a constant process of change and decay. Many of us fear death, clergy included. We may well fear dying more than 'being dead'. We might also fear not knowing quite what state awaits us after death. Christian hope, after all, concerns matters as yet not fully comprehended. And yet, many people turn to the church in the face of death and clergy are often treated as experts on the subject, but who can claim such expertise? As Andrew Davidson writes, "responding to questions about the nature of death calls for a combination of humility and confidence: humility in the face of the 'undiscover'd' element, and a simple confidence because of the death and resurrection of Christ. In contrast, a know-it-all expert on the 'theology of death' is not likely to be the right person to work with the dying, take a funeral, or comfort the bereaved. Our task is both to bear witness to the faith of the Church and not to exceed the Church in her reticence"[6]

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[4] Elliot, T.S. *Murder in the Cathedral*, London: Harcourt, 58

[5] *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella by Leo Tolstoy published in 1886

[6] Evans, Sioned & Davison, Andrew*, Care for the Dying*, London: Canterbury Press, 2014, 13f

Rowan Williams once described the task of the Church as teaching people to pray and teaching them to die.[7] And there is a link between the two. Prayer marks the orientation for our lives, that our lives are more about God than work, for instance, or 'getting and spending' as Wordsworth put it. If eternal youth is one of the cults of our age, one of its heresies is that we must be doing and achieving all of the time. Jesus told us Mary, rather than Martha chose the better part. "Prayer reminds us that human beings, and time itself, have an intrinsic meaning, beyond productivity. What matters most are our relationships, with one another and with God…..Prayer..is it's own justification. When we lose sight of this we lose sight of the purpose of life. If someone has worth only through what she achieves or produces, in the end she will be deemed worthless. At death (and indeed before that), she will cease to achieve or produce. Since Christians think differently about people, work, prayer and leisure, they should also think differently about death."[8] We have to come to learn that this process of change and decay doesn't really matter provided the Spirit continues to live and grow in us; to express itself increasingly through a body which itself is passing away, working its way out of the body's shell as it were, like a seed springing to new life while the husk wastes away, dies and dissolves in the ground.[9]

But, in practice, it's never quite so straight forward as that. Christian metaphors about dying seeds and brand new life emerging at yet another level are fine, but we are still very human. For death is something that threatens to undermine the whole of our life – to take from us those best known, best loved. Here is something that evokes a terrible fear and cowardice within – an enemy to be avoided no matter what the cost.

I think there's another aspect to this as well. The possessiveness, which marks so much of our earthly life, asserts itself with even greater force when faced with the giving involved in death. Often, it's not until we come to terms with that total giving that we come to learn what a hold things have upon us. God has given us so many things to enjoy in this life, that we find it hard not to cling to them. We come to regard them as ours and we tend to forget that every person and every thing has only been given to us on loan, and the result is that we want to hold on to them for longer than is good either for them or us. Realizing that we have not appreciated them to the full while they were ours, we cling to them more tightly when death would snatch them from us. This sacrifice, this dying to self, is never an easy thing to learn.

When Jesus warned his disciples of the need to give up father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters for the sake of the kingdom, he was of course speaking about priorities and it wasn't as harsh as might first appear and yet there is the underlying message that the time does come when it is best for us, and for others, that they should find their own destiny, their own road, even their own death. In our fear and loneliness, we don't want to lose them. In their uncertainty and their heightened awareness of the beauty of life they do not want to let it go. But it may be necessary. It may be wrong for us to hold them, whatever the cost to ourselves. We can become like over-protective parents whose well-intentioned love stifles the growth of their child. We add to the turmoil of those who are still trying to come to terms with their own impending death with all its questions and confusions. This is understandable: we are emotionally involved. And sometimes we go kicking at the doors of heaven pleading desperately that the inevitable should not happen, and that we should have our own way, only

[7] Evans, Sioned & Davison, Andrew, *Care for the Dying*, 33

[8] Evans, Sioned & Davison, Andrew, *Care for the Dying*, 34

[9] For reasons of space, I have not explored in this paper Christian understandings of the nature of resurrection or the soul. Also, I am aware I have not covered the deeply sensitive topics of suicide and euthanasia and the pastoral implications and complexities involved.

to find those doors answered by one with wounded hands and side the Jesus who shared our human experience all the way to death, and beyond it, to burial. [10]

There is a lot of deception about death – much of it from kindly well-meaning Christians who fail to see that death is, as the Scriptures say, an enemy, who say in effect there is 'no need to be sad', since this person 'is now with Jesus.' In one sense all is well: "I desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better…"[11] On the other hand, the scriptures say that death is an enemy – one which is sometimes armed with the most terrible of weapons wasting the body and assaulting the soul. Death is "the last enemy."[12]

In the teaching of two of the Church Fathers, St Ambrose and his pupil St Augustine, we see this ambiguity. "Taking their thought as a whole, Ambrose tended to see death as a good thing, which can be made bad, whereas for Augustine death is a bad thing, which can be made good."[13] Ambrose thought life without death would be unbearable, it would be interminable. Indeed, he thought life is often pretty terrible. Augustine, on the other hand, saw death as standing against the innate human will to self-preservation. This sense that death is an evil was underlined by the early Christians when they insisted that martyrdom should not be sought – life is good and not to be thrown away.

Death, of course, is not the only topic in Christian tradition which presents us with more than one understanding. And, from the breadth of such understanding, we can garner resources for teaching and pastoral care, which should be used wisely. Again, as Andrew Davison writes:

> When it comes to death, the tradition provides resources for sympathy with a young person who laments the prospect of death; it also provides resources for sympathy with the person, worn out by illness, who seeks a departure. We can commiserate and encourage, but our commiseration should not, and need not, be glib. Sometimes a grieving family will not want easy comfort. They may find more consolation in the judgement of the Church that death is indeed 'the ultimate and most terrible evil of this life,' to quote Aquinas…than in being told that death is but a journey to another room.[14]

I still don't think we have got to grips with mortality and I suppose we never will until we have to and time really is running out. And when is that? The Psalmist spoke of three score years and ten, but not everyone reaches seventy while others go well into their nineties and beyond. We simply do not know. All we do know is there are certain limits beyond which no one has ever passed, and that every moment it draws nearer. The more we use up from our supply tank, the more conscious we are there is no question of refuelling. For each one of us will come the day when time has gone, but that moment is not now. And surely a consciousness of death should make us love and savour life all the more. There are a few lines from a meditation based on Psalm 8 written by Peter de Rosa:

Father, I thank you for the immense surprise of letting me be born.
Fifty years ago I was nothing. Fifty years hence I will be nothing.
It seems wonderful to me and strange that on this earth

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[10] John Wyatt argues that Christ not only shared our death but also showed us how to die well. He expands on the seven last words pointing out that in them Christ provides an ideal pattern for the Christian in preparing for death. Wyatt, John, *Dying Well*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018, 87ff

[11] Philippians 1:2-3

[12] I Corinthians 15:26

[13] Evans, Sioned & Davison, Andrew, *Care for the Dying*, 22

[14] Evans, Sioned & Davison, Andrew*, Care for the Dying*, 23

I once did not exist, need not, will not; but do exist.
If I were a stone, a bird, a blade of grass,
it would be good to be in existence for an hour
under your wise and gentle providence.
But you have breathed into my heart
your own breath, the everlasting Spirit;
and in my mind is the prospect of eternal things.[15]

Our generation seems to have lost this sense of hope and wonder and prospect of things eternal. When we read of the first Christians, living out the resurrection, they were very conscious of the presence of the living Jesus always with them and, because of his living presence, death would have no final power over them. Some of them, we know, faced very cruel deaths, but such was their confidence in their living Lord that their spirits were not defeated. In writing this, I'm not trying to conclude on a pie-in-the-sky when you die note – but it is that same living presence and that same resurrection the Church proclaims. But this must never be an escape from death and its clear message for our lives now.

Some people run from death to past memories, others escape into some future life beyond, but if our consideration of death doesn't awaken us to the wonder of life now, then it is pointless to speak of it. If it leads to gloom and self-pity it is positively harmful, but if it makes us say: Yes, I have wasted many years, there are many things I would like to be different, many of the best days are behind me but life is still mine, today is mine, I can breathe, I can live, I can share; like Ebenezer Scrooge waking up on Christmas morning we find that we are not dead, that life still lies before us, then such a consideration will have achieved something.

[15] de Rosa, Peter, *A Bible Prayer Book for Today*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1976, 88

Tracey Morris

Dead or Alive: What is the Future for the Christian Funeral?

DEAD OR ALIVE: WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR THE CHRISTIAN FUNERAL?
BY REV TRACEY MORRIS
MAY 2025

INTRODUCTION

A funeral marks the end of someone's life, and is a staple part of CofE ministry, but for how long will this be the case? Church funerals in the Church of England (CofE) are falling and funeral directors receive fewer requests for church funerals. Increasingly, adverts for direct funerals are appearing, selling the idea that 'no one really wants to go to a funeral' and it's 'far cheaper for family and friends to not have the bother'! Just hand over your loved one and use your money for a good party to celebrate the life of their loved one instead, leaving the rest to the crematorium. In light of this, my paper looks at Christian funeral ministry and asks whether there is hope for the future. I will focus on CofE funerals because this reflects my own priestly ministry. I begin by briefly considering the reason for Christian funerals, followed by current statistics and surveys of church and Christian funerals. I then consider my own observations, the experiences of my team, and the observations of a well-established Funeral Director (FD). This is not a full-scale research project, rather a first step in considering this topic. My aim is to show that, although I don't think funeral ministry is on palliative care yet, more focused research and discussion are needed, and change is required for any hope of keeping Christian funeral ministry alive.

PURPOSES OF A FUNERAL

To discern the future of Christian funerals we need to consider the purpose behind a Christian funeral. Church of England Common Worship books provide many prayers and rituals for a CofE funeral, a recognition of God's nature and power, and a palpable sense of handing the deceased to God. Each choice depends on what is deemed appropriate, considering the level of Christianity or faith that the deceased or the family had. These services recognise God's presence and acknowledge God's part in the deceased's final journey.

In "The Study of Liturgy and Worship", Larson-Miller[1] lists five essential actions for a funeral are to:

1. secure the reverent disposal of the corpse;
2. commend the deceased to the care of our heavenly Father;
3. proclaim glory of our risen life in Christ here and thereafter;
4. remind us of the awful certainty of our own coming death and judgment;
5. make plain the eternal unity of Christian people, living and departed, in the risen and ascended Christ.

This list, however, appears to suggest that church funerals are reserved only for someone who would profess to being a Christian. Does this exclude anyone who isn't sure, or who wouldn't label themselves as "Christian" but is open to a belief that God may exist, or sees a

[1] Larson-Miller L, *The Study of Liturgy & Worship*, Edited by Juliette Day, Benjamin Gordon-Taylor, SPCK, London, 2013, p.186

value in Christian ritual or ceremony and wants the prayers and the final handing over to "God", whoever that might be? If someone is not sure who Jesus is and doesn't know if they believe in Him, does that mean that they must hear that they or their loved one will be judged and may not have eternal life? Is this an appropriate moment for this, and is that really for us to say? If so, then the number of Christian funerals will surely follow the number of professing Christians. Therefore, a declining faith brings a declining funeral ministry.

This also separates funerals from the mission of God. I believe one of the purposes for a Christian funeral is to help give a new sense of hope, comfort, peace and love that the mourners may not have experienced before, that could lead them to find out more. I believe that part of priestly ministry is to demonstrate Jesus' life and love in all circumstances, for all people, in ways that are appropriate and life-giving. If saying goodbye to their loved one, seeing them handed over to a God of love and peace and experiencing a new hope helps loved ones, that can only be a good thing.

The pastoral introduction in the "Church of England Common Worship book on Funerals" (AKA "The Purple Book") says "God's love and power extend over all creation. Every life, including our own, is precious to God."[2] It continues with an explanation that although Christians believe in hope after death, "even those who share such faith feel a sense of loss and sorrow……Those who mourn need support and consolation. Our presence here today is part of that continuing support." If every life is precious to God, and all mourners need the comfort of God, then surely the answer is that Christian funerals do not require a faith. If God loves every person, then surely God would want to receive every person at the end of their life even if they didn't know God's existence.

Larson-Miller goes on to say that a funeral has multiple purposes. "It is for the deceased – to be commended; it is for the mourners – to be comforted; it is, like all liturgy, the praise and worship of God; it has some practical dimensions, inclusive of reverently disposing of the physical remains of the dead."[3] This is a more inclusive view of Christian funerals which allows for a new faith to be built through a funeral.

STATISTICS & SURVEYS

According to the Church of England's Statistics for Mission 2023 figures[4], in 2009 there were 90,560 church funerals. By 2023 this dropped to 64,610 (-28.7%). CofE cremations and burials dropped from 82,770 in 2009 to 32,590 in 2023 (- 61%). In total, all types of CofE funerals dropped by 44% in just 14 years (173,330 in 2009 to 97,200 in 2023). Interestingly, CofE cremation and cemetery funerals rose by 20,750 in 2020, while church funerals dropped by 25,210. If we assume that this is due to church closures during COVID, and that cremations replaced the church funerals, the reality is that CofE funerals still fell by 4,460 in 2020. There was, however, a rise of 16,620 church funerals in 2021. This could be due to

[2] Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship: Services & Prayers for the Church of England: Funeral Edition*, Church House Publishing, London, 2017, p.3
[3] Larson-Miller, p. 186
[4] Eames K, *Church of England Statistics for Mission 2023*, Church of England Data Services, London, 2024

the delayed memorials that took place once COVID restrictions were lifted. However, church funerals still dropped, from 71,400 church funerals in 2019 to 64,450 in 2022. Overall, there has been a consistent decline in CofE funerals from 2019 to 2023.

In 2023, the Funeral Guide website published "The Funeral Survey 2023: The UK Public's Perfect Funeral[5]. The survey asked the public what they looked for in a funeral and whether the service should be; spiritual, religious, other or non-religious. "A non-religious service has been the stand-out choice for the past five years and its popularity has continued to grow, with 25% more people opting for this option since 2017."[6] Despite a slight increase of 2% in 2020, religious funerals dropped from 27% in 2017, to 17% in 2023 (all religions). However, "[r]eligious services remain the second most popular option, despite just 17% of people opting for this service in 2023 – a decrease of 37% since 2017."[7] There has been a slight increase in those wanting a spiritual service, rising to 22.64% in 2020 (16.90% in 2019). However, this dropped again to 12.31% in 2023. What isn't clear is what constitutes a "spiritual" service.

The most popular location since 2017 is a crematorium (63.93%), with churches being the second popular (21.31%). This has remained relatively consistent at around 20% since 2017. This begs the question; what happens between people considering their choice of location, and the decision taken after their death, with church funerals falling year on year.

61.4% wanted a celebrant, which represents a 92% increase over the past six years. 28% still opted for a vicar, but "this choice has seen a 19% decrease in popularity since 2017."[8]

Most people (42.67%) wanted a modest and respectable funeral, described as "simple and traditional." However, since their last survey in 2021, "more extravagant funerals are on the rise, with a 71% increase in popularity since 2021."[9]

The survey ends with this statement:
"Overall, judging by Funeral Guide's data, the perfect funeral for the British public would be: *a modest, non-religious funeral service led by a celebrant at a crematorium, with everybody who knew the deceased able to attend…"*[10]
According to Coles funeral directors[11], the UK has seen an increase in direct funerals (no funeral service) with 20% of all funerals in 2023 being direct funerals, and pure cremations increasing by 11%. This is due to their relatively low cost, with 44% of people saying that cost of living is affecting funeral choice, as well as people wanting more choice, without being tied to tradition and ceremony.

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[5] Gallois, E, *The Funeral Survey 2023: The UK Public's Perfect Funeral,* published 13 June 2023, https://www.funeralguide.co.uk/blog/funeral-survey-2023-uk-publics-perfect-funeral, access 28 April 2025

[6] Gallois, para. 2
[7] Gallois, para. 2
[8] Gallois, para. 4
[9] Gallois, para. 1
[10] Gallois, para 4
[11] Coles Funeral Directors*, What is a Direct Cremation and why are they becoming popular?*, published 31 January 2024, https://www.colesfuneraldirectors.co.uk/what-is-a-direct-cremation/, accessed 28 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

According to an experienced Funeral Director (FD), requests for Christian funerals are dropping, with the vast number of requests being non-religious. The landscape has changed since he started 30 years ago, when celebrants and officiants weren't as available, with a vicar and a Christian funeral being the only choice. There was a rota system of clergy, and you got a vicar from anywhere in the city depending on who was available. Since the introduction of humanist and civil celebrants, things have changed. The vast number of Christian funerals today are for "church goers" or people who have a lot of people wanting large locations, which churches provide. Catholic funerals tend to be for more "staunch believers." There has been an increase in Muslim funerals, but they tend to have their own funeral directors.

The location of a church has an influence on popularity, with many rural clergy colleagues spending a lot of time doing funerals in their churches, with the church building being seen as part of community and tradition. Our parish is in a suburb where the church building is respected and well-used, but less as a religious place and more as a place for community activities. However, we have seen an increase in funeral requests from non-religious families since COVID. The use of the church buildings as a hub and vaccine centre during COVID has been a large part of this. GPs, patients and local volunteers encountered church members offering support and facilitating life-saving vaccines at a difficult and dangerous time. This led to funeral requests from families who ordinarily wouldn't have come to us but felt a connection and a trust. Regular community connections and support, providing ministry that works for them in an accessible way has also led to trust in the church that wishes would be honoured.

FD believes that increased clergy workload resulting in a lack of availability impacts Christian funerals. Some go out of their way to help, but others won't deviate from their weekly routine, which makes it difficult to find anyone. Funerals are unforeseen events and people are in a time of need, but when this help is not given, it effects their faith and the lack of availability pushes people away. Whereas it is easy to find a celebrant.

FD noted a decrease in generational belief, with less Christian education. People don't know the Lord's Prayer and church hymns like they used to and "the days of expecting a vicar in vestments are long gone." Of those who still want a traditional church funeral, many do not want a woman to lead it, which causes problems in itself.

The relationship between funeral directors, relatives and ministers also has influence. We experience many anxious families having a church funeral purely to honour their deceased's request. They fear a meaningless service or a minister who may "try to convert them." They are pleasantly surprised when given choices and freedom to think beyond organs, robes and hymns. Many still choose robes, hymns, and the Lord's Prayer, but they appreciate the freedom to come to that decision themselves. We offer love and support, which builds up trust.

FD observed a large number of priests who refuse to take cremation-only services, insisting on an additional service in church. This often puts people off and they revert to celebrants. In a recent report in 2023, Marianne Rozario said that if "church funerals are out, "celebrations of life" are in. Such "celebrations of life" are favoured for their flexibility, their ability to separate out memorialisation practices from what happens to the physical remains of the body after death, and their personalisation of music options and eulogies."[12] We have seen an increase in cremation-only Christian service requests, due to our willingness to work with the family on a celebration, whilst including Christian elements. These services can be beautiful and are often easier and less time-consuming to prepare and perform. FD noted that people often don't want a "religious" funeral but do want the Lord's Prayer, again raising the question: what constitutes a "religious" service? Perhaps it's more about the institution or tradition than faith. He also believes that an important part of a funeral service is ceremony. There may not be an understanding of faith, but the rituals and special nature of a Christian funeral remain important.

There are also experiences of "bad" Christian funerals with little or no message of hope, little mention of the deceased, and where the loved ones have had little input, so they struggle to understand and connect. However, spending time with families and learning about the deceased provide many ways that someone's life and loves can be connected to scripture. Funeral ministry is not transactional, rather it should be open and welcoming, showing genuine care, and offering hope and comfort.

Some funeral directors expect church services to be inflexible, but openness and friendly conversation, with a willingness to work together and support the family creates a trust. This isn't always easy, and there are times when funeral directors have dictated to us, often due to a lack of understanding about ministry and church life, or a business-like approach to funerals.

FD predicts that in approximately 10 years Christian funerals could be just church-goers, if nothing changes. He believes that the emergence of Pure Cremations will have an effect, especially with those with financial struggles, but he also believes this type of funeral is unhealthy and prevents 'closure' for loved ones. Society is becoming less involved with, and more distant from death. A century ago, there were fewer funeral directors and more open coffins in homes. People were faced with death, now we turn away from it. He believes there is an opportunity for the church to serve a need and fill a gap. He has seen churches continue to support families after a death, something that doesn't happen with direct funerals or celebrants. Also, when a family has financial issues, offering a church service after a cremation, free of charge, could make a positive difference.

FD's final comment was that people encounter more funerals in their life than anything else. Religion still plays a part in death, possibly even more than in life. People need an element of closure and a sense of hope, that there is something else after death. There could still be a place for us. Clearly, society is not looking for Christian funerals like it used to, so the question therefore must be, what are we doing about this?

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[12] Rozario, M *The death of traditional funerals*, published 20 April 2023, https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/04/20/the-death-of-traditional-funerals, accessed 11 May 2025

CONCLUSION

The statistics are clear, popularity for Christian funerals is falling, but requests for celebrants are increasing. If we refuse to change the way we do things, then the future is bleak. However, we are not on palliative care yet, and it is possible to reverse this trend. People are still looking for something spiritual, and the options for Christian funerals are vast, if we are willing to be open, less prescriptive, and give families a sense of freedom. Simple, traditional, modern, unusual, grand; we can do all of these. There is a misunderstanding about what a Christian funeral is, driven partly by a lack of "publicity" and negative experiences of Christian funerals and ministers. We need to define what religious and spiritual means to society and consider carefully what are our words and actions communicate to families and funeral directors about God. If we dictate, or refuse to take cremation-only services, we could push people towards celebrants or "pure-cremation" services, with few words of hope. We are perfectly placed to be an alternative to these services, if we allow ourselves to step out of the church building. If we take the advice of FD and reconsider the costs we request, then Christian funerals may be more available to people in difficult times.

The statistics support FD's view that declining Christian faith leads to declining Christian funerals. I believe that one of the most important things we can do is connect with our communities before death, build trust, and demonstrate openness and love. I also believe that being open with families and funeral directors helps to dispel the myths about Christians. I don't believe funeral ministry is dead yet, but it needs urgent treatment, and maybe we could flip things the other way around and see that an increase in Christian funerals results in an increase in Christian faith. Afterall, aren't we meant to be about love and hope?

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Observations:

Interview with Funeral Director – name and details kept anonymous for confidentiality and openness.

Funeral ministry team from St Columba's & Stephen Hill Church, Crosspool, Sheffield

CHRISTIAN OKEKE

Talking about God with end-of-life patients and their families in an acute NHS Trust: A chaplain's perspective.

Essay title: Talking about God with end-of-life patients and their families in an acute NHS Trust: A chaplain's perspective.

In April 1966, *TIME* magazine had on its front page three words: "Is God Dead?" The *TIME* annals documented that this headline sparked a significant stir, leading to phone protests and a record number of letters to the editors. We live in a society that has fiercely attacked belief in God and God-talk. The question here is this: Can we speak of God with end-of-life patients and their family in a secular acute NHS hospital? How in a human language can one talk intelligibly about a divine subject matter (Macquarrie, 1967)?

I will begin this essay by stating my standpoint and the current situation concerning the spiritual and religious climate as it's obtainable in the secular NHS context today. I will reflect on the general challenges of talking about God in an acute hospital as a healthcare chaplain. I will emphasise any requirements or issues raised by end-of-life patients, including God-talk, and discuss how healthcare chaplains engage with and address these needs or issues.

My standpoint

I approach this topic as a chaplain with an evangelical Judeo-Christian background, having grown up in a Christian family. I currently serve as the head of chaplaincy in a busy acute hospital and also care for a small congregation as a parish priest. I have been privileged to share the journeys of many patients at the end of life through conversations and numerous religious rituals.

I have always sought and continue to seek ways to understand how my faith applies to human suffering and to be a compassionate friend both as an individual and in my community (Swinton, 2007; Abel and Clarke, 2020). Therefore, my reflection in this paper is heavily coloured by my lived experiences as I inhabit the spaces mentioned above. My personality and perspectives on life are fundamentally Christian, friendly, and from a rich African cultural and traditional heritage of relationality, which has enabled me, with integrity, to stay true to my own faith while also being open to the everyday experiences and valuing of others (Nolan, 2015, p.198). I am also aware of my healthy sense of self-awareness.

Contemporary spiritual and religious diversity and variety of shared meanings

I am writing this paper in the full awareness of the ever-changing spiritual landscape of the modern and postmodern world, which is characterised by religious diversity, a variety of shared meanings, and freedom of choice or views of the world that are not always compatible (Beckford, 2003; Besecke, 2001; Gardner, 2012). Modernity has generated a 'spiritual marketplace' with more religious, philosophical, and scientific traditions. In this 'spiritual marketplace', pluralism becomes a way to make sense of things while also reaffirming the most important ideas of rationality (Besecke, 2001, p.374). We now live in a world of alternative representations and subjective experiences. People have diverse spiritual and religious constructs or frames of reference from which they construe meaningful narratives about their lives and situations, including illness (Giddens, 1991). There is no room for a once-and-for-all revelation (Hay and Hunt, 2000).

Contemporary spirituality is a dynamic and contested field with many different viewpoints, voices, and movements (Tacey, 2012). The recent census figures in England and Wales show that Christianity can no longer be assumed to be the established religion in Western society due to the decline of mainline Protestantism and the rise of secularisation and pluralism. We live in a world where institutions that used to shape people's identities are not as strong as they used to be (Ryan, 2002). Religious ideas, values, and practices are no longer seen as the only valid option available; instead, they are just one among many available options (Ganzevoort, 2011). We have progressed 'from a society in which it was nearly unthinkable not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the most ardent believer, is just one among many human possibilities' (Taylor, 2007, p.3). Today, a person's religious identity does not have to be tied to a church or even to moral or cultural traits that have historically been seen as religious (McGuire, 1998). These people have been described as those who still believe without belonging (Davie, 2015).

As in other modern societies, British society is becoming more diverse, multicultural, and multi-faith, which is a result of highly dynamic and profound change in post-industrial and post-imperial society (Ryan, 2002). We now live in what is characterised as 'the secularised public market place of healthcare amongst people of all faiths and none' (Pattison, 2001, p.39). This societal change, in turn, necessitates an approach to spirituality that sees it as broader than religion and applicable to a wide range of people, if not every person. It is an

expansive understanding of spirituality (Kevern, 2010) and ‘a way of talking about non-physical, non-material needs of people in general and in a variety of contexts from business to healthcare’ (Pattison, 2013, p.199). This shift in the country’s demographics is also reflected in spiritual care provision in the NHS

Contemporary spiritual and religious (existential) language has become a highly dynamic and contested field as people grapple with the spiritual dimension of experience as a result of the break with the past represented by modernity and post-modernity (Tacey, 2012, p.473). Within this new context, the role of healthcare chaplains ‘has changed a great deal from being the sole providers of traditional religious ritual to one of being a resource to people undertaking a much wider search for meaning within illness or the dying process’ (Speck, 2004, p.22)

It is within this context that healthcare chaplains are called to engage with patients at the end of their lives and journey with them, sometimes engaging in God-talk. These journeys with patients at the end of their lives are always a blessing to me, and I hoped that patients would also say the same. However, as every healthcare chaplain would attest to, it came with many challenges. At the start of any encounter, one of the theological challenges for me is discerning what God is already doing in the lives of the patients and finding my place to join him in that activity – cooperating with the Missio *Dei.*
I am determined to pay attention to the voice of God, who I expect to speak to me through the lives of patients. I always look forward to my theology and practice being transformed through my encounters. I am always aware from my experiences that in a state of extreme suffering and pain, people do sometimes feel abandoned and deserted and, in some cases, feel that no one cares for them.

It is important to state clearly, the conversations are not limited to patients, but to family members and caregivers as well. Patients nearing the end of their lives will tell anyone who asks about their source of strength and encouragement during difficult times that it comes from their family and friends.

Establishing the spiritual issues/needs at the end of life

Bob Whorton used the analogy of a train journey with many stations on the way to describe the elongated and twisted journey that many patients on end-of-life care had to endure before getting to their final moments in the hospital or hospice. These include diagnosis,

chemotherapy, Radiotherapy, coping with physical and spiritual distress and negotiating difficult conversations.

When people are nearing the end of their lives, they may be experiencing a great deal of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Other issues such as anxiety and fear often accompany these pains. The thought of leaving everything behind—your wife, children, business, etc.—hurts. There is also the deep issue of the need for healing, forgiveness, the reconciliation of broken relationships, and affirmation of worth.

People who are dying want to know if their pain and death have any purpose. For most patients, these questions are often framed in overtly religious terms such as, is this God punishing me? How could he allow this to happen? It also revolves around the whether God answers prayers or performs miracles. Sometimes with the end-of-life patients, often there is a sense of unfairness, of a tragedy undeserved.

Mostly, the issues revolve around existential life questions and relationships with the transcendent (a quest to understand the meaning of life or faith). It also involves issues of affirmation, support, reconciliation, and relationships. While not everyone has a religion, spiritual issues in this wider sense arise for almost all end-of-life (dying) patients. Many patients at the end of life who believe in God view him as responsible for causing or allowing their fate. Some feel abandoned by God and question whether God loves them or see God's intentions as cruel.

Whorton (2015) rightly identified that there is always an unexamined picture of God expressed in these conversations. It is a picture of God as a person in the sky who is like us but only a lot bigger. People perceive him as a God who rewards the good, escorting them to heaven, and punishing the wicked, consigning them to hell. Whorton (2015) goes on to state that 'this is the God that is embedded in the western psyche, and it is the God that our secular society has rejected. How does the chaplain engage in a conversation about this God?

The Calling of the hospital chaplain

Most Christian chaplains are called to fulfil spiritual and religious roles in a secular setting, and God talk has become delicate in public discussions in the Western world, especially in institutions such as hospitals and schools. Some patients may want to blame God for their experiences. I have supported and engaged in many God-talks with patients or their families

who, due to circumstances leading to them being put on the end-of-life pathway, told me they could no longer believe in God or His goodness.

There is surely no correct way of talking about God within the most strained and knotty of all human situations: the end of human life. In these situations, conversations about God often fluctuate between expressions of anger towards Him and feelings of closeness to Him as a source of immense comfort. However, creating the space for patients to verbalise their feelings, which include God-talk, is very crucial. For the chaplain, it necessitates an open-mindedness and a positive attitude, in addition to their own deeply held Christian beliefs (Parker, Fraser and Rivers, 2010). For some end-of-life patients, this situation provides an opportunity for a life review, the offering of prayer, and sometimes the celebration of the Lord's supper, during which the patient identifies with the suffering God.

I have learnt from my experience and practice in these situations that this is not the time or opportunity for apologetics or to try to be unduly protective of God. However, it always opens up an opportunity to engage in a conversation that would enable a gentle but sensitive challenge to any perception of being punished. Sulmasy (2006) is right that "it is not the task of the health care team to give patients meaning, value, or reconciliation, but to facilitate patients' encounters with meaning, value, and relationships that are already present as givens in the existential situations of their dying."

So, when I am with an end-of-life patient, I look and listen carefully to those primary core spiritual and religious issues that they are presenting to me, often framed as questions of meaning, values, and relationships.

Recently, I had the opportunity to listen to a patient who received a terminal cancer diagnosis. He and his wife have both recently retired and had planned the kind of life they were excited to live in retirement. All their hopes and plans vanished abruptly in the hospital after receiving the diagnosis. In conversation with the wife who was devastated, she told me how both of them have been faithful believers in Christ and tried to live upright as was expected of them, yet God chose to 'test' them in this manner

A 70-year-old woman, whose 42-year-old daughter was nearing the end of her life in the respiratory ward due to lung cancer, sought the assistance of a chaplain. As a devout person, she grappled with the thought that her daughter would pass away before her. She said to me, "It's challenging for me to make sense of it right now, and I am not just coping. I know that she won't recover, but it's still hard for me to let her die." A deeply religious woman, Mrs T is

active in her CoE church, where she runs the coffee morning for the community. At the end of a long conversation, she says, “I know that all of us will die one day. But I ask, why my daughter at this time? I know God has a plan and is in charge. But still . . . At this point, she breaks into tears. She then asks me to “please pray for her and remember us in your prayers.”

These and many similar situations are where God-talk finds its presence in acute hospital end-of-life situations. The question is: How do chaplains engage with these God-given opportunities?

Embodied relationality as a tool for God-talk engagement

In an acute hospital end-of-life context, embodied relationality is an attitude that says we are individuals (subjects) on a journey together, and it is the purpose of every encounter and the foundation of other rituals and ministries. It is characterised by authentic relationships.

So, the first step in God-talk with end-of-life patients is to connect with them or their family members, which leads to listening to their stories. Listening to stories authentically has the power to sustain, comfort, strengthen, and offer hope in the midst of suffering. For the healthcare chaplain, what makes the difference is what Lashmar (2005) described as the “possibility of ‘re-storying’ or of ‘finding an alternative story’, which might instil hope into a dominant story of pain and hopelessness.”

Another way of picking up God talk with end-of-life patients and their family members could be through clues that chaplains pick up from them—a copy of the Bible, Qur’an, rosary beads, Shabbat candles, Hindu amulets, etc. These clues most times allow God talk to proceed in an organic rather than a mechanistic manner, especially if the patient or family members share the same faith, language, or tradition with the chaplain.

Usually, it involves gently discussing what the patient and their family already know, assuring them that we don't have the answers, and helping them accept that God's answer to their prayers may not come or be what they expect. Sometimes it can be tough. Yet, regardless of religious affiliation, the need of the dying to understand that they are valued and cherished is a powerful spiritual need. Engaging in God-conversation with these patients brings reassurance that this value is still intact regardless of their present condition. It is also a ministry of presence.

The ministry of presence

Hospital chaplains, through their 'ministry of presence', which speaks very loudly in end-of-life situations, especially when patients are feeling distant from God or feeling abandoned by others speak about God and hope in a more profound way. Hospital chaplaincy is primarily a caring ministry, which may or may not lead to a sharing (gospel in words) ministry. By being present with the end-of-life patients, chaplains demonstrate to them that they are worthy of time and attention as they share their stories. Being present in these encounters, for me, is to encounter Christ not only in the person of the chaplain nor only in the persons on the end of life but in every human person and in every encounter, and without the intention of making such human persons anonymous Christians, but rather of seeing every interaction with them as one with Christ (Todd, 2018, p26).

Conclusion

As patients nearing the end of life grapple with their mortality, their spiritual and religious concerns may be awakened or intensified. Some patients may explicitly raise spiritual or religious issues with chaplains, whereas others may not discuss them but may be troubled by them or make medical choices based on them. Most times, prayer and religious rituals such as holy communion may help patients near the end of life and their relatives find comfort and discover meaning in their lives. Religious ceremonies can provide meaning, hope, and solace to patients and families. These are the contexts in which most of the God talk takes place with end-of-life patients.

Some questions to ponder about with the group

How easy or appropriate is it for God-talk in other people's work situation?
Does the fact that there is such a plurality of opinions make it easier or harder to talk about God in a public situation?
Does the approach I have suggested for hospital chaplaincy translate across to other work situations?

Note:

The section of the essay under the heading: ***Contemporary spiritual and religious diversity and variety of shared meanings,*** *was taken from my unpublished research thesis titled:* The attachments and relations of dialysis patients: Rediscovering embodied relational chaplaining.

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Rachel Wakefield

How can the Church speak about God, unless it re-examines itself and exemplifies what it means to be the Body of Christ, held together by tensions and difference, rather than a broken body?

Paper for 2025 Clergy Consultation, St George's House, Windsor. Rachel Wakefield.

How can the Church speak about God, unless it reexamines itself and exemplifies what it means to be the Body of Christ, held together by tensions and difference, rather than a broken body?

I was recently involved in discussions about the different ways in which Christians understand the place of The Bible. The conversation was between people of different church traditions and theological positions, an incredibly common occurrence these days within the Church of England in particular. The breakthrough came when one member of the group pointed out that as Christians, we all hold the bible to the same standard, but the challenge for us as The Church is that we interpret it differently.

By assuming that we may find common ground with agreement and acceptance of this, that if we acknowledge our differences of understanding are down to interpretation and not a mere binary notion of right and wrong, then we could work together in ways we had previously struggled to.

Rather than relying on Richard Hooker's "Three-Legged-Stool" of Scripture, Reason and Tradition, we unwittingly embraced the Wesleyan Quadrilateral including Experience. It allowed the participants to be more aware of the stories of one another and how that might mould their interpretation of scripture, allowing us to see one another as different parts of the Body of Christ rather than "others" who were to be distrusted or discarded.

So much of the differences within the church today create division, rather than accepting other interpretations as offering something which is necessary for the Body of Christ to be whole. Those who would say that they hold a traditional or orthodox view of scripture, at the expense of women or LGBTQIA+ people, seem to therefore put forward a model of the Body of Christ which is not whole, and which does not embrace all God's children.

How can the church speak of God, if this is how it is speaking? If "show, don't tell" is held to be a useful technique to engage an audience, tell a story and show something of the nature of what you are trying to convey, the Church of England is showing something which is less than the Body of Christ, smaller than God.

If we can step back and accept that we hold differing views because of our own understanding of the use of scripture, reason, tradition and experience, then perhaps we can go some way to exemplifying the Body of Christ exactly *because* we are acknowledging our differences.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians he explains that there are different gifts, different services, different activities which we carry out or are given, but they are all in the service of the same God. And that verse 6 says,

> *"it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone"*.

These different gifts and callings we are told are "in everyone". Not just those who are the "usual ones" but also those who go against the expectations of the traditional decision makers. Women, children, those of other races and identities. God activates His gifts in everyone. If this is the case, surely we cannot speak of God if we are marginalising a single one of those people? How can those looking in on the church, those who have been hurt and damaged by it, through judgement, abuse, neglect or lack of love, see a church who is speaking of God. Returning to the idea of "showing not telling", perhaps we should be asking "How can the Church Show God?"

Paul's letter continues to take us through the varieties of gifts which the Spirit allots as she so chooses. We do not get to decide, it is decided for us, by God. Again, seemingly without judgement.

And so if we wish to show or speak of God as "The Church" we must surely love and accept equally each part of the Body of Christ. In verse 12 Paul writes that,

> *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jew or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit"*.

Paul continues to outline the need the body has for each part. It needs the foot and the eye. We need the stories and the experiences, the possibility of different interpretations so that we can be, show and speak of God as the Body of Christ.

We therefore need to accept those differences, without judgement or a desire to change others. We need to step back from our need to make The Church speak of God in a single way and welcome those who are different, who may show us God in other ways, and perhaps we need to embrace this not because we want to be changed, but because we don't. To move to a position of acceptance of others and in so doing, discover a much richer church and have the true unfathomable nature of God revealed to us in this.

This may mean a change for us all. In her book "Theology for the End of the World" Dr Marika Rose asks,

> *"What would it look like for us to let go of all the privileges that are conferred on us at the direct correlate of the violence done to*

> *other people? What would it look like to let go of the desire to be saviours for people who neither need nor want our help? What would it look like to be a radical who is prepared to risk life for freedom? What would it look like to let go of the whiteness, the maleness, the heterosexuality, the middle classness which allows us to feel as if the world resolves around us?"*[1]

While I would argue that this goes against the call to love your neighbour, defend the weak, give to the poor, and so on, I wonder if Rose's question should prompt us to examine our own attitudes to want to change those who are different from us, and that instead we simply follow Jesus' command to love them. There are clearly matters of injustice though which we are called to address, but perhaps this asks us to consider what are *actual* injustices, over things we simply don't agree with? Is Dr Rose drawing on Micah 6 verse 8 and suggesting that we just do what the Lord requires of us, to

> "*do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*"

If we can acknowledge the differences and embrace one another despite them, will that acceptance of others begin to reveal more of the God we are trying to show and speak of, than an attempt to be a church which implies that God's children are all the same; that we all meet and encounter God in the same way, that our experience of life will match up and therefore the outworking is a single, colourless, flat and dull attempt at showing who this God is who we believe in?

If there was a single answer to so much scriptural interpretation and questions thrown at Jesus, would he not have responded in straight forward answers rather than parables? Is it not possible therefore that God, in the person of Jesus understood that people would experience life differently and therefore understand scripture in different ways?

If we all continue to argue our own points of view suggesting that "the Bible is crystal clear on this" are we not missing out on so many of the different gifts and services God gives and calls us to? If we decide that the people God made are in some way "wrong", do we not begin to lose parts of the Body of Christ which we need, to speak of and show a God who is beyond description?

If those on the fringes of the church, or those who have never encountered God see a church speaking of a God who does not embrace all His children, can we ever expect them to see themselves as loved by God and to find their place in His church and in the Body of Christ?

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[1] Rose, Marika. "Theology for the End of the World" SCM Press, London 2023. 31

Robert Jenson in his book "Can These Bones Live?" argues that the role of the church as the Body of Christ is the corporate identity of Christ, as Christ being, and in, and available, in the world. He writes,

> *"If the world wants to get rid of Christ, what it has to do is persecute the church because that is the place where Christ is available. If the world wants to hear Christ, all it has to do is listen to the church, because again that is the thing as which he is to be found."*[2]

At the moment the Church has the chance to be that voice of Christ but through its inability to accept difference is persecuting itself so that the world will not listen.

It is when the church acknowledges its difference that perhaps it begins to speak of God and show God in some small way. I was invited recently to join other clergy at a local Secondary School. This is a school with a Christian Foundation, but not a Church of England School. The staff shared with us the nature of the worship there and later the deputy head explained that the staff are drawn from churches throughout the area, of a wide variety of denominations. They meet to pray and worship together and in those moments the churches and traditions they come from fall away, as they simply pray and worship God. By its very nature this is a school with different Christian traditions represented among its staff and pupils, but they show God in the way that those labels, identities and theologies become insignificant when they gather to worship Him.

Is it possible that this example could be something which the Church needs to draw from? To own the differences and labels rather than use them to tear itself apart? That those tensions we have are the very things which keep the organs and muscles, the bones and the cells of the Body of Christ together?

The prophet Isaiah encourages us to think of this with bigger and bolder words. In chapter 2 we are told that all the nations shall stream to the Lord's house, established as the highest of the mountains. That God (and only God) will "judge between the nations, and will arbitrate for many people". But crucially the result of this will be that,

> *"they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more".*

This prophecy of hope and unity, of peace and equity should encourage us that there is place for us to live peaceably with our different backgrounds, cultures and identities. That the lives we have led, and interpretations of scripture are not intended to separate us from one another and God, but

[2] Jenson, Robert. "A Theology In Outline, Can These Bones Live?". OUP, New York, 2016. 97

that within the smallness of the many images of God with which we find ourselves we might through them glimpse a tiny part of the glory of God, reflected in us who are made in His image. The Body of Christ, on earth, now.

G.G.D Kilpatrick writing on this passage suggests that some may dismiss it as wishful thinking or mere poetry but says,

> *"The truth, on the contrary, is that the faith uttered in this prophecy is indispensable for the hope of the world. Here is a conviction born of Isaiah's reading of the mind of God, that there shall yet be a day when mankind shall live together in faith and righteousness and brotherhood. How desperately our world needs such a faith!"*[3]

It is something we are called to do, as The Reverend Dr Wilda C. Gafney writes,

> *"(It) bids us walk in the light of God with peoples from all the nations of the earth"*[4]

And so, we can see that differences are foretold, but so is the vision of unity.

But can that only come when we gather together with our differences, rather than trying to "other "one another? Could it be that the acceptance of difference, of other experiences and interpretations could be the process by which the Church as the Body of Christ, across all denominations and countries where experience and therefore interpretation will differ, could lead us to be able to show and speak of God to all, across divisions?

The Reverend Dr Charlie Bell brings the reality of the challenge of this home though when asking *how* we actually live with difference in the church, particularly when it comes to sexuality and identity. He suggests we need more rigorous thinking around how we present theological viewpoints. He writes,

> *"It is hard to look a gay teenager who attends a church that calls them intrinsically disordered, in the eye and say there must be room for all theologies in the Church….. if that gay teenager were to be told – 'this is our view, and hold it strongly, but there are others, and here is someone who could tell you about it' – then we find ourselves in a fundamentally different position."*

Later he writes,

> *"We do not win people for Christ by pretending there are no other arguments, rubbishing others or steamrolling people….. This is*

[3] Kilpatrick, GGD, "The Interpreter's Bible". Abingdon Press, USA, 1956. 180

[4] Gafney, Wilda C, "A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church". Church Publishing Inc, New York. 2021. 66

> *what radical openness looks like, and if we are to live together with disagreements in this matter, then we need to be open and honest in all our doing. We may be wrong – all of us."*[5]

And this call for acknowledgement of difference but a need to stick together comes from across the church. John Stott, the former Rector of All Souls, Langham Place wrote,

> *"Christians go on everlastingly splitting until they find themselves no longer a church but a sect. They remind me of the preacher described by Tom Sawyer who 'thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to hardly be worth the saving.' Others lump everybody together indiscriminately until nobody is excluded."*[6]

We know that we have differences. Different experiences, educations, lifestyles, opportunities, traditions, abilities and gifts. These will lead to different biblical interpretations, in part because God chose to give us free will and the answer of parables to influence our own individual journeys of faith. We cannot therefore avoid difference and if God had expected anything other, would He or She not have made us all the same?

So if the Church, in all its many forms and places wants to speak about God, to show God, we have to own and accept the differences we have, showing that those tensions are what so often hold the Body of Christ together, but it is powered and bound by the love Christ has for us, and that we must therefore endeavour to show to one another. Then, perhaps, we might be a church who can speak about God.

[5] Bell, Charlie, Queer Holiness. Darton, Longman & Todd. London, 2022. 218
[6] Stott, John, https://johnstott.org/john-stott-at-100-why-evangelicals-still-need-him/ accessed 13/6/25

HARRI WILLIAMS

Reclaiming Mary in the Anglican Tradition

Introduction

'When Mary speaks the cosmos shakes, history reverberates, and we see afresh that God remembers His people. Truly she is to be called blessed.'[1]

These words from the former Archbishop of Canterbury signal that the Blessed Virgin Mary is a figure within the Christian tradition who should be celebrated and revered. In the ecumenical conversations of the past fifty years a substantial amount of progress has been made in seeking to affirm Mary as a figure of unity, to acknowledge and support the theological claims relating to her, and to enable her to serve as an example of holiness of living for all Christians.

This essay will seek to address how Mary needs to be reclaimed in the Anglican tradition drawing on the heritage, writings and liturgies which have characterised the Church of England over several centuries.

As the parish Priest of the Walsingham Benefice it is important for me to identify to the reader that I stand within the Catholic tradition of the Anglican Church. In seeking to write this essay I have deliberately sought to derive a significant amount of my research from the authors of the Assumptiontide Lectures. This lecture, which has been held annually in St Mary's & All Saints' Little Walsingham since 1979, has engaged the minds of many notable Anglicans,[2] and it is from the depth of that collective knowledge that I have sought to inform my own argument and display how Mary is an inherent part of the Anglican identity.

[1] Justin Welby, Sermon at the National Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham 2019, accessed September 18, 2020, https://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/WelbySermon.pdf, p.2

[2] Although some have since converted to Roman Catholicism.

Reclaiming Mary in the Anglican tradition

The division in respect of how Anglicans view Mary within the life of the Church undoubtedly stems from the division which exists within the Communion about how 'Anglicanism' began in the first place. Colin Buchanan notes in his work,[3] that there are three views of how Anglicanism began. The first being that Christianity in England began during the Roman period (43-410AD), and from this lies the inheritance of English Christianity. The second believes that the new evangelisation of the land began through the Celtic saints of the 6th and 7th centuries, with the arrival of Augustine in Kent in 597AD, and becoming the first bishop of Canterbury, from which an unbroken continuity of the Christian Church to the present can be traced. The third view on the contrary would look at the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century as the:

'key formative factor in the distinctive culture, ethos, doctrine and organization of the Anglican Communion we know today.'[4]

It would be fair to state that the first two views have a great deal more in common than the third. Both those who would see themselves as deriving their origins from the Roman period and those who would view the emergence of a church during the 6th and 7th centuries, would find themselves within a tradition which roots itself in a Catholic understanding of the Church; its teaching, spiritual practices and devotions. Those seeking to adhere to the third view, would identify the Reformation as a point at which many of the teachings and spiritual practices of the Church were altered, and that a return to that tradition, would be a betrayal of the foundation of Anglicanism. These differing schools of thought could easily relate their position on Mary to the way the Gospel writers treat her in their respective narratives. Luke providing a prominent voice for Mary, and John signifying her theological importance, contrasts with the acknowledgement of Mary's existence in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, but only in relation to her Son, and in a manner, which as others commentators have indicated, lacks positivity or significance.

In my opinion, to be an Anglican who professes to believe, in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, is to recognise that although the Church of England underwent a period of reform and renewal during the 16th century, it is not a new church, but the Church of St Augustine and the Celtic saints. Through this prism of perspective, as Colin Podmore argues:

'we can and should claim pre-Reformation English Marian devotion and theology as our inheritance.'[5]

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[3] Colin Buchanan, *Historical Dictionary of Anglicanism* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), pp. xxxix-xli

[4] Buchanan, p.xli

[5] Colin Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition* (Walsingham: Walsingham PCC, 2014), p.2

Marian devotion within the Anglican tradition was therefore derived from the pre-Reformation period and, as this essay will seek to illustrate, was sustained throughout the 16th and subsequent centuries.

During the 11th century, Marian devotion grew within the English Church. The celebration of the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was first acknowledged within the western calendar in Winchester in 1030AD, having been celebrated in the eastern Church from 600AD onwards, and although it was supressed by early Norman authorities, it was quickly restored to the Canterbury Province's calendar by 1129.[6] The apparition of Mary to the Lady Richeldis in 1061, and the subsequent erection of the Holy House of Nazareth in Walsingham, established a shrine in England which was almost unique in western Europe. Most other continental shrines only originate from the 13th to the 15th centuries. Robert Ladds argues,[7] that it was the influence of Walsingham which caused other shrines in England to be established, such as those which were to be found in Ipswich, Lincoln or Glastonbury, and that this expression of popular piety was further strengthened when Richard II dedicated England as Mary's Dowry in 1381. It was during the 14th and 15th centuries that, due to increased devotion, Lady Chapels were established in parish churches and cathedrals, which continue to remain a feature of English Church life today.

It was however the excesses of Marian piety which the English Reformers of the 16th century reacted strongly against, and yet as Michael Nazir Ali and Nicholas Sagovsky argue:

'the place of Mary in Anglican doctrine was never in question.'[8]

It was the acceptance of the four ecumenical councils by the Convocation of the Church of England in 1536, together with the creeds, and the place of Mary in Scripture, which assured the security of her place within Anglican belief and teaching. The retention of Mary within the new identity of the Church of England of the 16th century is testified by her continued presence within the liturgical publications of the Church.

The Primer which was published in 1545 retained the Ave Maria (in its biblical form, with no petitionary versicle and response) in its customary place at the beginning of Mattins. Although the 1549 Prayer Book saw the radical pruning of Marian devotion, the work continued to observe the feasts of the Purification on the 2nd February and of the Annunciation on the 25th March. In this, Mary's title as Virgin is never questioned and in the publication of the 1559 Prayer Book, a table of proper lessons at morning and evening prayer indicate that the 25th March is entitled the 'Annunciation

[6] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition*, p.2

[7] Robert Ladds, 'Popular Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in England-An Historical Perspective', in *Mary, A Focus for Unity for all Christians* (East Harling: Postprint), p.6

[8] Michael Nazir-Ali and Nicholas Sagovsky, 'The Virgin Mary in the Anglican tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in Adelbert Denaux & Nicholas Sagovsky, *Studying Mary* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 132

of Our Lady'. From 1561 the Marian feasts of the Conception on the 8th December, the Nativity on the 8th September and the Visitation on the 2nd July were also included. Only the feast of the Assumption remained excluded, and would continue to be omitted until the liturgical developments of the late 20th century. By 1662 the title 'Blessed' was inserted into the title of the propers for the feasts of the Annunciation as well. The retention of Mary within the Anglican liturgical calendar did not however compensate for the destruction of many sources of Marian devotion such as statues, stained-glass or other images. But as Podmore argues:

'it meant that the Church of England continued to be a church in which Our Lady was honoured, not one in which she was treated as if she had never existed. That provided the basis for a future growth of devotion.'[9]

That devotion continued to be maintained and developed by the Caroline divines of the 17th century. Lancelot Andrewes, who served as Bishop of Winchester and died in 1626, included in his work 'Preces Privatae' which was published in 1648, a phrase borrowed from the Orthodox Liturgy:

'commemorating the allholy, immaculate, more than blessed mother of God, and ever-virgin Mary',[10]

John Donne, who died as Dean of St Paul's in 1631 wrote in his 'A Litanie' of a tender love for Our Lady 'and a very firm belief in the efficacy of her prayers.'[11] Archbishop William Laud publicly displayed his devotion to Mary by erecting a statue of the Virgin and Child in a niche in the newly built porch of the university church in Oxford, in 1637. Podmore identifies that this was probably the first such statue which was erected since the Reformation,[12] and although it was subsequently used as evidence against Laud during his trial and then destroyed, it remains testimony to the renewed presence of Marian devotion within the Anglican tradition, even during a period of considerable civil and religious unrest. As Nazir-Ali and Sagovsky have recognised, even following the Puritan Commonwealth, devotion continued through the writings of Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) and Thomas Ken (1627-1711). Traherne, who was ordained priest in the Church of England in 1660, wrote in his work 'The Church's Year':

'And first O Lord I praise and magnify thy Name

For the Most Holy Virgin-Mother of God, who is the Highest of thy Saints.

The most Glorious of all thy Creatures.

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[9] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition,* p.5

[10] Lancelot Andrewes, *The Preces Privatae of Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester*, tr. F.E. Brightman, (London: Methuen, 1903), p.85

[11] Roger Greenacre, *Maiden Mother and Queen: Mary in the Anglican Tradition* (London: Canterbury Press, 2013), p.124

[12] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition*, p.10

The most Perfect of all thy Works.

The nearest unto Thee, in the Throne of God.

Whom Thou didst please to make

Daughter of the Eternal Father.

Mother of the Eternal Son.

Spouse of the Eternal Spirit.

Tabernacle of the most Glorious Trinity.'[13]

These words emphasise the central place of Mary in the incarnation and the salvation of humankind, rendering to her the devotion of one to whom the people of the Church of England could appeal as the Mother of God. Ken went further in his work 'Sion or Philothea' when he wrote:

'Her virgin eyes saw God incarnate born,

When she to Bethl'em came that happy morn;

How high her raptures then began to swell,

None but her own omniscient Son can tell.

'Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced,

Next to his throne her Son his Mother placed;

And here below, now she's of heaven possest,

All generations are to call her blest.'[14]

Whilst Ken does not refer to the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, the climax of this work acknowledges her place as Queen of heaven. The Church of England in the 17th century was therefore not Protestant in its outlook, as some may wish to portray it, indeed Reginald Herber (1783-1826) who served as Bishop of Calcutta wrote the words:

'Virgin born, we bow before thee: Blessed was the womb that bore thee:

Mary, Mother meek and mild, Blessed was she in her child.'[15]

Throughout the post-Reformation period therefore and into the beginning of the 19th century it is clear that the classical themes of Anglican Marian devotion of motherhood, purity, and blessedness were prominent within writing and teaching,

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[13] Quoted in A.M. Allchin, *The Joy of All Creation: An Anglican Meditation on the Place of Mary* (2nd Edition, London: New City, 1993), pp.117-8

[14] *The English Hymnal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), No.217

[15] *The New English Hymnal* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986), No.187

and that, as Podmore argues, to state that such devotion only emerged within the Church of England through the influence of the Oxford Movement is simply incorrect.

The fathers of the Oxford Movement; Keble, Pusey and Newman, were clear in their understanding of the place of Mary within the Church's tradition. Indeed what they sought to do through their effort was not to introduce practices or doctrines which were alien to the Church of England, but rather to build on the foundation which already existed. Certainly, there was dissension between the leaders of the Oxford Movement in their theological views regarding Mary:

'Even Newman, apparently in the twilight of his Anglican years, felt that addressing the saints to request their prayers was a step too far.'[16]

However, Keble certainly felt moved to do so, and this was testified through his poem 'Mother out of Sight' which was not published until after his death in 1869 in which he wrote:

'So unforbidden may we speak an Ave to Christ's mother meek: inviting so the saintly host above with our unworthiness to pray in love.'[17]

Seeking however to document the rise of Marian devotion through the first fifty years of the Oxford Movement would be a task impossible to achieve in this essay, however Podmore has identified that increased devotion to Mary within the Catholic Movement has influenced the wider Church of England and the Anglican tradition in general in four key ways.[18] Firstly, the inclusion of Marian hymns in both the English Hymnal and the New English Hymnal. The presence of the hymn 'Ye who own the faith of Jesus' written by a Principal of Pusey House, Vincent Stuckey Stratton Coles, testifies to the significant change within the liturgical practices of the Church by the beginning of the 20th century. No longer was a chorus of 'Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary, full of grace' seen as something un-Anglican.

Secondly the Catholic movement normalised the appearance of statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary within parish churches. In Walsingham, it was not Fr Alfred Hope Patten who erected the first statue of Our Lady, but rather his predecessor Fr Edgar Reeves (Vicar of Walsingham 1904-1920).[19] Through the benefaction of Fr Francis Baverstock, he erected a small alabaster statue near the High Altar which even survived the devastating fire of 1961, and remains within the parish church to the present day.

The restoration of the shrine at Walsingham was the third way in which the Catholic Movement influenced the Church of England in its Marian devotion. Although Bishop Pollock of Norwich was certainly far from a great supporter of Marian devotion, it was he who insisted the statue be removed from the parish church, he did little to prevent the erection of the shrine. After its erection, although he remained critical of

[16] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition*, p.16
[17] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition*, p.15
[18] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition*, p.17
[19] Michael Rear, *Walsingham Pilgrims and Pilgrimage* (2nd Edition, Leominster: Gracewing, 2019), p.197

the practices undertaken there, he did not use any disciplinary powers to prevent acts of worship taking place at the shrine. His quiet disapproval now stands in stark contrast to the support provided to the shrine by the presence, preaching and prayers of Archbishop Robert Runcie and his successors as Archbishops of Canterbury. Justin Welny in his sermon at the National Pilgrimage to Walsingham in 2019, spoke of the importance of Walsingham as a place of pilgrimage and of Mary's role:

'And Mary makes place in this world including, especially, here at Walsingham. They are thin places where she comes, open to the Spirit of God, and a reminder that we are pilgrims and strangers.'[20]

Walsingham, once seen as an eccentric oddity perhaps within the Church of England during the early and middle part of the 20th century, has quickly become an established and important feature of Anglican life and devotion.

The fourth way in which the Catholic movement has shaped Marian devotion in the Church of England is by the increased material made available for Marian feasts. This work began through the publication of the Alternative Service Book in 1980 and was enhanced by the publication of Common Worship in 1999 which raised the 15th August as a festival. This provision having already taken place in the liturgies of the churches of the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia several years before. Which as Charles Sherlock and Peter Cross maintain recognises the:

'realization by Anglicans that at least one feast is needed which belongs to Mary herself, rather than having a Christological focus, also reflecting on Mary.'[21]

A feast which focuses on Mary together with the extended provision in Common Worship provides:

'huge extension and enrichment of the official provision for liturgical celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church of England, which is now widely used far beyond the bounds of Anglo-Catholicism,'[22]

In addition to Podmore's argument I would want to include the foundation of the Society of Mary in May 1931 as a significant factor in the growth of Marian devotion within the life of the Church of England. This Society came to existence through the amalgamation of two earlier Marian organizations: The Confraternity of Our Lady (founded in 1880) and the League of Our Lady (founded in 1904). The objects of the Society of Mary are: To love and honour Mary; to spread devotion to her in reparation for past neglect and misunderstanding, and in the cause of Christian Unity; to take Mary as a model of purity, personal relationships and family life.[23] Through its work,

[20] Welby, National Pilgrimage Sermon, p.2

[21] Charles Sherlock and Peter Cross, 'The Liturgical commemoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion' in in Adelbert Denaux & Nicholas Sagovsky, *Studying Mary* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.234

[22] Podmore, *Blessed Virgin: Mary and the Anglican Tradition,* p.18

[23] Ladds, 'Popular Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in England-An Historical Perspective' p.8

the Society of Mary has promoted the role of Mary within the life of the Church, seeking to ensure that she plays a prominent devotional role in the life of both the local and national Church. Rowan Williams remarked that the Society of Mary has done much to keep the message of Mary alive:

'a church that often seems a bit embarrassed by the idea of rejoicing in Mary's triumphant faith and loving participation with us in the Body of her Son;'[24]

Mary must be reclaimed as an inherent part of the Anglican tradition. Although the Reformation constrained some of the excesses of piety which were undertaken at that time, Mary's identity within the Anglican Church was never in doubt. To display devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary has continued to play an important part in the Anglican tradition, and the contribution of many scholars, bishops and priests to this work, testifies to her role as central to the Church's teaching and understanding. To ignore this tradition, is to abandon much of what it means to identify as an Anglican and to forget that since 1539, clergy and lay people of the Anglican Church have said or sung daily the words of Magnificat in which 'all generations shall call me blessed'.

[24] Rowan Williams, *Mary, A Focus for Unity for all Christians* (East Harling: Postprint), Foreword

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