

Signs of the Times

The newsletter of Modern Church

April 2017 Issue 65

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Editorial: The Dark Ages?

Anthony Woollard

Many of us were brought up on the historical myth of the Dark Ages. Around the fifth century of our era, we were taught, Roman civilisation (in the West at least) collapsed under its own weight and the onslaught of 'barbarians' from the east and north - weakened also, perhaps, by the doctrines of the 'pale Galilean'¹ replacing the bracing militarism of empire. Yet it was the followers of that Galilean, especially monks, who kept culture alive in isolated enclosures, and gradually converted and civilised the barbarians, preparing the way for the flowering of the Middle Ages.

Like all myths, no doubt, this contained some truth. Certainly much of Europe became rather more chaotic than it had been at the height of the Roman imperium. And Christian monks and scholars certainly played a vital role in preserving and developing culture. But we now know that the traditional picture was over-simplified. The so-called barbarians have turned out to be rather more cultured, though hardly less violent, than previous generations had realised. Graeco-Roman culture, which in any case had its own heart of darkness, did not disappear completely, and it was not only the monks who helped preserve what was left, though they certainly built the foundations for the Christendom to come.

¹ 'Hymn to Proserpine' by Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1866, addressed to the goddess Proserpina, lamenting the

rise of Christianity for displacing the pagan goddess and her pantheon.

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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology.

Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England,

we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

Signs of the Times

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Signs of the Times is published in January, April, July and October.

It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying graphics. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective - in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard.

Send material to the editor by 8th December, 8th March, 8th June or 8th September. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words.

We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).

Perhaps we are entering a new dark age. The Russian bear rises again, and other powers, from the Middle East to China, seem likely to demonstrate frighteningly unpredictable hegemony. Europe and the USA seem to be descending into chaos, with the growth of a populist and xenophobic sensibility which we have not seen since the 1930s. Some commentators have suggested we are seeing nothing less than the death of a certain kind of liberalism: the belief in democracy as a core principle, and the hope that improvements in education would lead voters to support a broad consensus of values including anti-racism, anti-sexism and an opposition to narrow nationalism and religious/cultural imperialism.

We may wonder whether the only response is to hunker down, as those monks allegedly did, in reasonably secure enclaves (until the Vikings come as they came to Lindisfarne), in the hope and prayer that, when the storm is past, the world may again be ready to receive the values we have sought to defend. Even within the Church, some of us liberals may feel quite as beleaguered as those old monks.

Or is it all an over-simplification? Do those who are with us, perhaps in surprising places, still outnumber those who are against us? Here is one straw in the wind from a key battleground within the Church itself. A town parish in a conservative evangelical heartland, under the patronage of a church society of that tradition, recently declared itself 'open and inclusive' and told its patrons to get lost when they sought to influence the appointment of a new incumbent. Extraordinarily, its parish profile revealed that a number of PCC members were in same-sex relationships and expected any new incumbent to respect that fact. The outcome of this dramatic act is unknown at the time of writing; and, in any case, one swallow does not make a summer. But it should give us cause to think, especially when so dramatically followed by the defeat in General Synod of a seemingly innocuous 'take note' motion on the Bishops' all too conservative report on marriage and same-sex relationships.

Counter to that, it seemed at the time, was the initial appointment to the Diocese of Sheffield of a Bishop apparently committed to non-recognition of the orders of women - who constitute around one-third of the parochial clergy there. Modern Church and partner organisations such as WATCH were much exercised by this. Then he withdrew at the eleventh

hour, with a degree of integrity which we must surely respect, acknowledging the concerns of those in the Sheffield Diocese, and possibly influenced by our campaign. There was and is, in the dialogue which continues about this unhappy episode, both evidence of grace and at times something less than grace. But who knows what work of the Spirit may be going on here, as in that parish and that Synod decision?

A 'Dark Ages' response may nevertheless be entirely appropriate in some cases. The little platoons which make up an organisation like Modern Church must necessarily spend time nourishing their values within the darkness around. If we do feel the need at times to huddle together, and even indulge in a little nostalgia, there may be no shame in that. We are told that the Kingdom of God is like a householder bringing forth from her treasure things new and old - and some of the old values of Christian liberality seem in danger of being swept away at the moment. If parts of this edition have a slightly backward-looking flavour, with Rosalind Lund's obituary for Joan Dorrell and Humphrey Prideaux's anniversary sermon, I make no apology; reflection on our personal and collective pasts is no bad thing. Yet we live by hope, looking forward at least as much as backward, and Modern Church's Council strongly reaffirmed that at its annual residential meeting in March.

Brenda Watson's article below reminds us that attention to reason, to which we are utterly committed, is not by any means the same as rationalism, and suggests that that confusion may have hampered our mission. Lorraine Cavanagh, in her keynote address to Council as Acting General Secretary (an appointment which Council confirmed up until the AGM), gave a similar message in her call to 'reclaim the soul of Modern Church'. Part of her address was a reminder about the danger of 'isms'. There is such a thing as dogmatic 'liberal-ism' - a rather rationalist, and in the narrowest sense modernist, understanding of the Gospel which was evident in some quarters in Modern Church's early days - which we need to go beyond if we are to respond effectively to the challenge of promoting the Gospel in a dark age. She saw true Christian liberalism as a *style* of doing theology and spirituality, a radical openness opposed to fundamentalism in all its forms, rather than a *substantive* set of dogmas (e.g. 'the Virgin Birth did not happen'), which can creep into liberals' thinking in our legitimate pursuit of that openness, and which feed the caricature of our

position many of our interlocutors in the Church hold, from the Radical Orthodox to the Conservative Evangelicals. This message, together with her call to link the work of the intellect more closely to that of the spirit, gave us a lot to think about.

For what it is worth, I hold no brief for belief in the Virgin Birth, and consider what happened at the first Easter is an ineffable mystery going far beyond the simplistic picture of a body emerging from a tomb (David Jenkins' 'conjuring trick with bones'), and that the rather confused traditional ideas of life beyond death may raise more questions than they resolve. I puzzle, even, about the very concept (or concepts) of God, though I look forward to illumination on that score from this year's Annual Conference. I suspect I am far from alone in these positions, and I believe that they open possibilities to seekers after truth which a more traditional theology (let alone a fundamentalist one) closes off. But I also believe that it would be wrong to take a dogmatic stand on such positions. And in that too, I suspect, I am far from alone. We need constantly to allow ourselves to be questioned by the tradition, to acknowledge the partial validity of the caricatures of us held by our interlocutors, and to recognise the need to go beyond them - because God, however we understand God, is always greater than our 'little systems'. The occasional 'cabarets' at Annual Conferences have given us an opportunity to laugh, not least at ourselves - yes, even amidst the darkness around - and it was Harry Williams who said that laughter was one of the truest foretastes of Heaven.

'If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who can prepare themselves for battle?' That is the perennial cry of the fundamentalists and crypto-fundamentalists, and we must not be seduced by it into dogmatically foreclosing our continued search for truth. Yet we also need to acknowledge that it has some validity, and poses a question to us. Lorraine and others such as Martyn Percy in that marvellous 2014 Annual Conference, and Guy Elsmore in past editions of this newsletter and on our blog, have reminded us that we do have a Gospel to proclaim, and we must proclaim it. If the world ever needed it, it needs it now, in this age of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts'. Can we believe in a faith which involves living with questions - the faith to which David Jenkins and others of our sources of inspiration were so committed? Can we live out our beliefs, build a Church that represents those beliefs, and invite

others to join us? In the words of a very recent US president, YES WE CAN!

Council asked, therefore, in the light of Lorraine's presentation, exactly what Modern Church is for. This question is posed acutely in the context of a new initiative, involving some of our most distinguished members, to create some sort of alliance between the various Anglican groupings who wish to reclaim the centre ground of our Church which seems in danger of being lost. (The title 'Broadchurch' has inevitably been mooted for this, and some of us wish that we had thought of that for Modern Church, and claimed David Tennant and Olivia Colman as patrons! Well, who knows...) Some such bodies, at least, do exist to promote 'isms'; the role of those representing open catholicism and open evangelicalism needs to be considered in these times when the 'closed' versions of both 'isms' are being promoted by so many in such damaging ways. And, yes, there may be such a thing as liberal-ism which is in our DNA and which we cannot and must not wholly disown. But we agreed we were not there to promote an 'ism', but, perhaps above all, to provide an intellectual and spiritual **safe space** in which faith can be openly explored (though 'safe' does not mean avoiding the obligation to challenge where necessary), which will attract younger people, the many who claim to be 'spiritual but not religious', and those who have a background in those closed 'isms' who feel the need to grow beyond them. The worship at our meeting reflected this in a particularly moving way.

What then must we do? Council was clear that we have to invest more money from our (significant but not infinite) reserves in our work, including the appointment of a paid part-time officer, working with elected officers, with our other paid staff who do such magnificent work, and with the members themselves, to enable more activism than has been possible in the recent past. We identified areas such as the encouraging regional groupings and day conferences, and contact with theological education and training institutions, if we are to reach those whom we are not reaching at present. The Dark Age requires something like this, though some expressed a number of cautions about the risk of such a step-change in our organisation's way of working and our finances. Council affirmed that our elected officers could proceed as quickly as possible, taking all the comments on board, to make a suitable appointment.

If we need to be pour more resources into action, however, that must not mean some sort of headless-chicken activity in which we neglect to learn how to 'be' spiritually in this new world. In fact it very much includes such spirituality, as Lorraine reminded us in her address to Council. The proposed Modern Church course, introducing the Christian faith from a liberal perspective, could be one key to this, and we should bend our efforts to its development, as well as to such other initiatives such as regional groups and day conferences. But the challenge goes further; what, Lorraine asked, would it mean for us to be seen as a community of worship and spirituality as well as thought and action?

We need to make fuller use of the talents of all our members, and the energy of the proposed new member of staff, to put ourselves out there more prominently, and address the prejudices which see our work as at best an irrelevance. Other voices in the Church, let alone in the media and elsewhere, are active and often strident, and we need to become a more respected voice in the ongoing dialogue about faith in the Dark Age.

Maybe, however, we should be careful to avoid imitating the stridency of others; I find it interesting that two of the books reviewed in this edition take up the theme of silence and the quiet influence of Quakerism, whilst a third explicitly links local activism and spirituality. If we are called to be as wise (and actively challenging) as serpents, we are also called to be as gentle and harmless as doves, and recognise (as I suggested earlier) that the Spirit may be at work in unlikely places.

A reminder finally - though members should find a flyer in this mailing - of the **Annual General meeting** of Modern Church at **2.15pm on Tuesday 11th July**, at High Leigh Conference Centre during our Annual Conference. The AGM receives the Trustees' report and accounts, and elects one-third, each year, of the members of Council who in turn annually elect the Trustees. Members of Modern Church are urged to attend and vote, even if they are not coming to the Conference itself. We may or may not be living in a new Dark Age, but, as will be clear from the above, we live in interesting times. And, if there is to be any safe space for both healing and challenge, this Conference will certainly help to provide it. ■

The Janus-like role of Modern Church in exposing a myth about reason

Brenda Watson

The January 2017 issue of *Signs of the Times* raised the question of the role of Modern Church. One of its greatest strengths, it seems to me, lies in its rigorous openness to intellectual challenge, and I think this should be shared much more on the two fronts implied in its title: the modern world and the Church. On the one hand, there is a need for a decisive informed religious voice in the modern world, academically and regarding general thinking as a whole. On the other hand, it is important to dialogue more with conservative-minded Christians who, whether inclined to 'orthodoxy' or evangelicalism, tend to be over-comfortable with tradition and not sufficiently open to reasoning. I think Modern Church can perform a valuable service for both by exposing a widespread and damaging myth about reason.

Suspicion of religion has had a field-day in the West, further encouraged by the notion of the secular state. Originally this may have been indeed for religious reasons, to enable people of different religious persuasions to live amicably together instead of fighting each other. It has however produced a situation of practical atheism. To hide religious belief from the public square is unavoidably to prioritise atheism because, in its negative form, atheism simply never mentions God. Supported by an increasing number of intellectuals since the Enlightenment, atheism, intellectual and practical, has become the default position.

In academia and in education generally it has been, for many decades now, counter-cultural, to admit to being a Christian. This readily creates a sense of fear and unwillingness to think deeply about faith when such reasoning is so closely associated with unbelief. Moreover, Christians have often imbibed from the modern age, as well as from some traditions, a desire for absolute certainty. This can provide fertile ground for fundamentalism to flourish, for it gives little encouragement to religious believers to critique their faith responsibly.

Behind this scenario lies the myth of the all-pervasive power of reason understood in a narrow sense. The West has tended to see *reason* in terms of just logic and scientific/empirical investigation, leading to

presumed *objective* knowledge. Anything beyond this is presumed to be *subjective*, unreliable, dependent on anecdotal hear-say and open to an 'anything goes' criticism because there are no definite ways of testing it; it becomes *mere opinion*. This fact /opinion has had baleful consequences. It has been responsible for priorities in education, treating the arts as peripheral, giving encouragement to moral relativism which endangers society as a whole, creating a rift between cognitive and emotional capacities and a corresponding presumed rift between reason and religion, favouring atheism on the grounds that religion is irrational.

Yet this view of reason is false. A recent book by the humanist philosopher Julian Baggini on *The Edge of Reason* (Yale University Press 2016) powerfully debunks this misunderstanding of reason. He discusses four myths regarding reason, the first on which the others depend being 'the notion that reason is purely objective and needs no subjective judgement'.

He writes as an agnostic or atheist, so he doesn't bring out effectively the weakness of the actual link between atheism and reason, but he does concede that reason cannot rationally dismiss religious faith.

However, Modern Church can be crystal clear on the non-rationality of atheism. The argument, for example, that God does not exist because there is no scientific proof rests on a logical fallacy. For it assumes that *scientific* evidence is necessary to establish the existence of God. Yet God, if existent, is the creator of the world discoverable by science, not a part of that world to be discovered. It is arguing in a circle to presume at the beginning of an argument what purports to be its conclusion.

I would like to see such arguments presented in a wide variety of forms, both academically and in journalistic style, and in educational material for schools and churches. Exposing this faulty line-up between atheism and reason may encourage those tempted towards fundamentalist forms of faith to take tentative steps out into the open. It would also highlight the need for the political elites in the West to take religion much more seriously and to re-think the presumed necessity for privatising religion. ■

PCN Britain invites you to the second Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture presented by Robin Meyers

Christine Alker

The second Marcus Borg Memorial Lecture is on Saturday 13th May 2017 in Bristol.

Dr. Robin Meyers is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ in the USA.



He is the Distinguished Professor of Social Justice at Oklahoma City University, a best-selling author, a columnist, and an award-winning commentator for National Public Radio. He has been the Senior Minister of Mayflower Congregational UCC church of Oklahoma City for 31 years, the fastest growing UCC church in the Kansas Oklahoma conference.

He is the author of seven books, including *Saving Jesus From The Church* and *The Underground Church* and will join Dominic Crossan in continuing the series of books begun in partnership with Marcus Borg. Marcus' widow, Marianne, has also asked him to help set up the Marcus Borg Foundation.

The event will be at St Stephen's Church, 21 St. Stephen's Street, Bristol BS1 1EQ. The Church is fully wheelchair accessible. There are car parks within walking distance of the church. From Temple Meads railway station the number 70 bus to St Stephen's St takes 15 mins.

Robin Meyers will also speak at **St Thomas the Martyr Church, Haymarket, Newcastle upon Tyne** on Monday 15th May.

You can find further details of both these events on the PCN website:
pcnbritain.org.uk/events/detail/robin_meyers
or call the PCN Administrator, Sarah Guilfoyle on 01594 516528 or email: info@pcnbritain.org.uk ■

In memoriam: Joan Dorrell

Rosalind Lund



Joan Dorrell at the 2008 Lambeth Conference

Joan was a familiar figure at Modern Church annual conferences, snapping away with her camera to get photos for publicity material or displays during the year. In fact I'm sure a number of her pictures have a continuing life on the Modern Church website, which might have surprised her as she had something of an allergic reaction to the idea of the internet and modern technology - her own trusty typewriter, handwriting or the telephone were her preferred methods of communication. She appreciated being made a Vice President in recognition of her service to Modern Church over many years.

Joan started coming to Modern Church conferences in the early 1980s so I didn't get to know her until sometime in the 1990s. However, she soon became friends with my parents, Simon and Christina Tebbutt, and found herself elected to Council. There her talent for minute taking shone out and she soon became secretary to the Council and to the Standing Committee (as the Trustees were then known). Her meticulous minutes were hugely valued by Richard Truss as Chair and Nicholas Henderson as General Secretary. She had a good memory for what had gone on in the past and never hesitated to speak up if she thought someone else's memory was failing! In fact she always did speak her mind whether on matters of procedure or principle. She valued Modern Church in the first instance for its stance on the ordination of women and was already a member of the Movement

for the Ordination of Women (MOW) when she joined Modern Church. Always a keen lay member of her local church, Joan was for some years Lay Chair of her Deanery Synod and enjoyed being involved in all aspects of church life.

When Joan moved from Ipswich to Needham Market, she joined the worshipping community at Somersham, a nearby village where her mother had lived and where Joan already had a number of friends. On either side of the altar of this church are two fine mid-eighteenth century pictures of Moses and Aaron. Joan felt these were well worth restoring and undertook the organisation and finance of this project - a much appreciated memorial to Joan herself.

The little church was full of Joan's friends and former colleagues and the simple service with tributes from her friends made us feel Joan's real presence again with us. We heard something of her wonderful holidays, her work as a teacher of social workers at Suffolk College and her membership of the Sorooptimists, a global volunteer movement working together to transform the lives of women and girls.

Jonathan Clatworthy, Richard Truss and I represented Modern Church at her funeral. I don't think she missed an annual conference in all the time I knew Joan, and she will be much missed. ■

Sermon: 'What if.....'

To mark my 80th birthday and 54th anniversary of ordination, at St Mary's Church, Alverstoke on 31st January 2016, the Feast of the Presentation, at 9.15 am Holy Communion, by Humphrey Prideaux

'Simeon came by the Spirit into the Temple'. Luke 2.27

What if Simeon had not popped into the Temple that morning? A moment that changed his life and his way of seeing. Those two small words: 'What if'. How many 'What ifs' in our 18 or 80 years have changed our life and our way of seeing? If you get bored with my 'What ifs', reflect on your own!

December 1992 at Fareham College. I am a widower. I say to my colleague, 'When you're on your own on Boxing Day, what will you do?' She says, 'I'm going out with the Ramblers.' 'May I come?' I say. Ten months later we marry. What if I had not spoken to

Joy in that tea break? Cardinal Basil Hume said, 'When two people love, they experience in this world what will be their unending delight, when one with God in the next.'

Amazement and gratitude. Are we amazed? Amazed at us, at the 'me' I am? What is the chance of one particular sperm meeting one particular ovum and developing successfully into me - or you? Amazing. I have an aching knee. Over my 80 years, how many times has that knee worked for me? What engineering! Amazing.

The ninth planet in our solar system, they say, could be 19 billion miles from our sun and ten times the mass of Earth. But which is more amazing - that lump of rock, or one small grey sponge, a baby's brain? As the Psalmist says, 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made'. (Psalm 139). What if my dad, a priest in South West Africa, hadn't become ill with gall stones and gone to Cape Town for treatment? What if he hadn't met my mum at church there? They came home and married in Hatfield, and I, plus my elder sister and younger brother, were born in Salisbury.

I am a pessimist, a 'half-empty glass' person; I have to encourage myself to be amazed and grateful. So our first gratitude is, each of us, for our amazing uniqueness, that I am who I am, that you are who you are. It is in that uniqueness that we occasionally glimpse God at work.

Pope Francis said, 'God created us and let us develop according to the internal laws that God gave to each of us, so that each would reach their fulfilment.' I said we 'occasionally' glimpse God at work. But God is not only 'occasionally' at work - that would be no god. We can't worship an 'occasional' god. God is ever present, ever involved. 'In God we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17.28). As a fish can only live in water, so can we only live in God.

Joy said to a friend, 'When we go off in the caravan, Humph takes God and Agatha Christie.' I know my Agatha Christies backwards. I know the endings. I look for the clues she scatters along the way. How well do we look for the clues of God at work along our way? 'New mercies, each returning day, hover around us while we pray.' In the *Radio Times* the TV presenter Sue Perkins said, 'At the end of each day I list things I'm grateful for.' I've learnt from her. I now do that in my diary each night.

New mercies. When my first wife Brenda died suddenly, my daughter Anne was in Portugal. We phoned her. She was just going out. Another minute and we should have missed her. She answered our call. What if she had been out? A new mercy even on that day.

Let me go back to the summer of 1954. I am waiting to be called up for National Service in the Navy. A friend from school phones me: 'Humphrey, my army call-up has come. I promised to go with the Franciscans on their hop-picking mission. Would you take my place?'

I had never even heard of the Franciscans, nor their hop-picking. I went for one week and stayed six. There my childhood faith became adult. Still, 60 years later, I find renewal when I meet with Franciscans - bless them. What if my friend had not phoned me? What if I had decided not to go to the hop-fields? A chance conversation, a chance phone-call, an invitation is so often God being involved in a change on our way; other people become God's co-workers to help us.

In 1961 I went as a curate to Northampton. After 17 days our great vicar, Father Charles McKenzie, suddenly died. God is there in tragedy, sorrow and death. We wept for his wife and their family. The shortest verse in the Bible is 'Jesus wept'. God weeps. This is not a new idea. An early Jewish saint said, 'God wept when his children the Egyptians died in the crossing of the Red Sea.' I moved to St. James', Milton, Portsmouth. There I married our churchwarden's daughter. What if Father McKenzie hadn't died? How my life would have been different.

I've only been ill once - 1977 with suicidal depression. I was in my GP's surgery in Lancaster, where I was a senior lecturer at St. Martin's College. He rang the mental hospital. The psychiatrist said he had a cancellation. He saw me that afternoon and took me straight into hospital. I was healed by him and the drugs. What if he hadn't been free to see me? I don't know if he was a Christian, but everyone who brings wholeness to others is God's co-worker. He said, 'You need a change, but not straight away.' Now aged 41, I had been a student and teacher of theology for 21 years. But out of interest I had also begun to study science, maths and computing with the OU, the Open University. So two years later I decided to change tack. I started to apply for new jobs; I was unsuccessful. God is there in failure as well as success.

Then in March 1980 I applied to Price's College, Fareham, as a teacher of maths and computing. But, to save money, Hampshire Education Authority had ruled that schools and colleges must make no new staff appointments from outside the county after March 31st. I was interviewed on March 31st. Some head teachers are wary of appointing a priest, but not in this case. The Principal of Price's was Chairman of The Christian Education Movement. He said, 'I think you are taking a risk, Mr. Prideaux, but someone should let you take that risk,' and I got the job. What if I had missed the date deadline?

What if...? What if...? What are these 'What ifs'? To us they appear as random chance. How does Luke describe them in our reading? Three times he says the Holy Spirit guided Simeon. We may agree with Luke, but we have a problem. Does the Holy Spirit only guide 'occasionally'? Again - an occasional god is no god, an idol. Always, we must remind ourselves that we can never comprehend God. We are human. God is God. I lift a paving stone near my sun-lounge. A wonderful world of ants. Can those ants comprehend me? No. Nor can we comprehend God. God gives us just enough insight to keep going, like God's gift of manna to the people in the desert - just enough. No one can show to someone else that God is. All we can do is to share with them our trust in God, and say to them: 'Very occasionally I glimpse God at work for me, with me, in me. That glimpse is enough, most days, to convince me that God is. A glimpse of God at work at a deeper level of being than ordinary sight, a glimpse of "more". To the power and the glory of that glimpse, that hint, I want, I need to respond.' So, again, what are these 'what ifs'? Are they simply luck, good and bad? Professor Stephen Hawking is wise and inspiring. He says, 'I was unlucky to get motor neurone disease, but I've been very lucky in almost everything else.' Is this luck, this random chance, compatible with our picture of God? I suggest, yes, it is.

Consider some words we might use in our picture of God. Two words: con-cern and con-trol. God is ever concerned for us. Does God also control us? God makes creation independent of himself. God builds random chance into it. This is the risk God chooses to take. Only in this way can anything, us included, be really free, and not simply God's puppets. No, God does not control. But with eternal care, God is concerned for each atom of the universe, each atom of us. Two more words: inter-vene and inter-act. Does God intervene in our lives? Or does God interact by

inviting us to respond. The picture of God intervening, however biblical, traditional and common, is a problem. If God does intervene, why does not God intervene more - in earthquakes, in man-made horrors? Wednesday was Holocaust Memorial Day. 'Intervene' implies an occasional god, an arbitrary god. Every second of our existence God invites us to interact with him. God has eternal patience. The Father of the Prodigal Son waited. God waits for us to respond. And, when we do, strangely we know it is not of us but of God.

And the mercy is, our gratitude is, that so many do interact with God, do respond to God in each generation, on each continent. They do not always realize that they are responding to God's invitation. But they do reflect God's wisdom in them. They are involved in what God is passionate about: fairness, generosity and wholeness, which together create holiness. All sorts of people build the kingdom of God - not just Christians. Brenda's death was from a subarachnoid haemorrhage, in 1991. In 1992 an Italian surgeon pioneered a new procedure to cure this. (Insert a platinum coil up from the groin to inside the burst blood vessel.) Three years ago, my daughter suffered the same crisis as her mother. But she didn't lose consciousness. She just managed to phone 999. She knew what had hit her. The ambulance took her straight to Southampton General Hospital neurological unit. The surgeon, who was just about to go on holiday, saved her life. So many 'what ifs' here. What if he had not learned that new skill? I don't know if he was a Christian, but he was God's co-worker for the kingdom. God's time-scale is not ours. We want instant results. God over millennia is bringing in the kingdom. And in each millennia God has co-workers, open to God. The visionary prophets among them see more. They see deeper into the spiritual dimension than the rest of us. They take us forward to the next stage of human evolution. For us Jesus is decisive, but not exclusive. He is so open to God's invitation, he so interacts with God, that in him and with him we hear and see and trust God at work, a different way of being, the way less travelled. Step by step we are being transformed.

And that leads to my final 'what if'. Back in 1953 I applied to take a degree in Classics (Greek and Latin) at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. My housemaster at school was related to the chaplain there. He and his wife invited me to tea. He suggested I consider Theology. The college could not offer me a place for

Classics (I was not good enough) but they could give me a place for Theology. And I accepted it. What if I had not gone to tea with Christopher Evans? He was a deep radical New Testament Scholar, a deep man of prayer - the confessor and spiritual director to many. (I went to his 100th birthday party, and to his funeral aged 104 three years ago.) He helped me see that a living faith is a thinking, searching faith. Loyalty to Our Lord does not stop us asking questions. We ask questions about what people have said and believed about God and Jesus down through the ages. We ask questions to search for the meaning in our day of what he did, and said, and was, in his day. That has continued to be my journey as a person, as a Christian and as a priest.

A paradox is holding two incompatible statements as both true. Our life is a paradox. We experience sheer chance and yet we feel compelled to talk of God's involvement and Providence in our lives. Maths is full of paradox. For example, you can't divide a number by zero. Newton appeared to do just that. His colleagues said, 'You're wrong.' But he gave us Calculus. Two centuries later that paradox was resolved. You and I won't resolve the paradox of our faith until we are in the clearer presence of God. One of my tutors, David Jenkins, became Bishop of Durham. He was accused of being overcomplicated in his faith. So he wrote his faith on a post card. Thirteen words, all monosyllables except one. 'God is. God is as he is in Jesus. So there is hope.' Amen. ■

BOOK REVIEWS:

J Brent Bill,

***Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality* (Eerdmans 2016 2nd ed.)**

Rebekah Hanson

Brent Bill's book provides an introduction to Quaker spirituality, which focuses on silence in spiritual practice and worship. He argues that the riches of spiritual silence are often overlooked in today's busy world, even in many Christian churches, and invites the reader to reflect on the spiritual imbalance that neglect of silence may bring. The book consists of an introduction, five main chapters, and a short closing chapter, plus sections on practices, queries and a glossary. For a book that has been 'revised and expanded' it remains a fairly short and easy read at

under 150 pages. However, it covers a range of topics relating to the spiritual depths of silence in both worship and everyday life from a Quaker perspective.

The first chapter explains how Quakers understand silence sacramentally,

'The deep silence of the soul is our Eucharist' (p.7).

It is in silence where worshippers meet Christ. Chapter Two discusses the spiritual practice of silence in various religions as well as within Christian history. He notes that many modern-day Christians often make use of these practices from non-Christian sources, which implies a lack of awareness of how silence has been understood and practiced in Christian spiritual life. These chapters help the reader to understand how silence in Quaker life relates to spiritual practices in the wider Christian tradition.

Chapters Three and Four discuss the personal challenges and discipline of practicing spiritual silence in daily, modern life. He warns that this leads to deeper awareness of one's own faults and insecurities which can be easily avoided in the noisy, hectic activities of life. Therefore, practicing silence can be inwardly turbulent, but peace is found as one's relationship with God grows in a silence which makes room for God's presence. In these chapters in particular, readers are encouraged to reflect on how to make time and find space for spiritual silence in everyday life. Bill movingly describes, through his life experiences, the transformative power of encountering God in silence and its impact on his relationships with others.

Chapter Five shifts the focus from personal practices of silence to the wider context of worship and community as highlighted in the first chapter. This reminds the reader that the subject matter of the book points toward something greater than personal spiritual development. He makes clear that while people will come to silence in different ways, nevertheless, the spiritual silence practiced in the Quaker tradition is one of communion. He also offers suggestions for incorporating times for silence in non-Quaker worship environments.

The book is written in a straightforward and conversational manner, but it nevertheless offers a rich introduction to Quaker spirituality for those

interested in learning about the power of God's presence in silence. Throughout the five main chapters, there are interspersed 'quietude queries' which guide the reader to stop and reflect on the different aspects of Quaker spirituality and how these practices can be incorporated into one's daily life. This was helpful for pacing the reader so that one does not necessarily breeze through the book, as well as offering a way to dip one's toes in the waters of silent reflection. If the book is read in a group setting, the 'quietude queries' could easily be used to invite discussion among readers. While Bill writes from the heart about the transformative impact of Quaker spirituality, he is careful not to pressure the reader to drop everything and join a Quaker community. If one is looking to find out about how to gently ease into practices of Christian spiritual silence, *Holy Silence* is a good place to start.

Rebekah Hanson is currently doing an MA in Public Theology and her interests include photography, exploring places and creative spiritual expression. ■

Terry Waite, *Out of the Silence: Memories, poems, reflections* (SPCK 2016)

Tim Purchase

We all know of Terry Waite, and most, if not all, will hold him in very high esteem for the totally unselfish way he was involved in hostage negotiations in the Lebanon and his own subsequent incarceration at the hands of abductors for five years. Therefore it was with great expectations that I opened his latest work.

The first thing to note that this is a collection of memories, poems and reflections, and not a normal work of prose. This may put some people off. I am no lover of poetry, and I approached this book with caution, but the poetry is easy to read, and comprehensible, and prompts the reader to return to individual poems over and over again.

The book begins with a reminder of his long confinement. He alludes to the fact that he started 'writing in his head', only later being able to physically commit to paper his experiences. This current volume is a reflection on those times, and other events since have caused him to contemplate life and its meaning.

What is surprising is the fact of his confinement actually caused him to want to seek solitude after his

release. He comes to realise that it is only in the silence and tranquility that he can come to terms with what he feels about life and more importantly about God. He states that he has become a Quaker, and that this does not prevent him continuing to be a member of the Church of England, from either side. He actually coins the term Quanglican, which I suspect may not be original, but it does disclose a deep seated desire for quiet reflection.

Throughout, what shines through the writing, both prose and poetry, is Waite's immense sense of compassion for all people and the situations which they find themselves in. As Karl Jenkins commented on the cover: 'Peace would universally reign if the world was full of people like Terry Waite'. This is both a heartfelt sentiment and a wonderful caricature of the man, as revealed through his writings.

One of the important stimuli for the book was the invitation to go and stay at a remote farm cottage in New Zealand, giving Waite the opportunity to reflect and write down his memories and the attendant poetry. The presence of a pair of cows in an adjoining field provide a pivot for the thoughts being put on paper, and their seeming disappearance was for the author, a matter of concern (they had been moved to another field out of his view, it transpired). Their subsequent return was a sign of a return to normality, and in a way pointed to a deeper truth about Waite's relationship to the Almighty. Sometimes he had very dark spells during his captivity, when not only did he question his belief in the inherent good nature of humankind, but he also questioned God's role in creation in these sorts of circumstances. For him, as for many others, this is an unresolved issue that he continues to wrestle with, however, Waite has never lost his faith in God, and ultimately in humankind.

The only possible downside of this work is fact that the author refers to events very much in our memory; they are known to us and we can relate to them. As time moves on, those events will recede into the mists of time, and their significance may not be altogether clear to readers in future generations. However, the poetry will shine through the ages, and that in itself will keep this book readable for many years to come.

Tim Purchase is a long standing Anglican of the Catholic tradition with a genuine interest in researching traditional and more radical thinking. ■

**Keith Hebden,
*Re-Enchanting the Activist: Spirituality
and Social Change* (Jessica Kingsley 2017)**

Keith Thomasson

Hebden works with the related ideas of enchantment and re-enchantment. This involves releasing ideas (or losing, letting go of them) and becoming reacquainted with those ideas (or reclaiming and re-enchanting them). He works with the self, God, religion, affliction (or suffering) and death. His creative thinking is enriched by encounter with many current trends of thought and public theology. This is a lively and stimulating read. Goldman, Soelle, and Edwina Currie all within a page of one another! It is from an author who is using such material to weave a response to the inequalities within everyday life.

This book is from a stimulating spiritual-practitioner who is rooted in Christian faith, and passionate about welcoming others (people and ideas) and the Other in order to enact change. This book is for those passionately committed to connecting spiritual practice and enacting change. This is rich fare. As Hebden comments,

'Theology that sits in synod but does not walk our streets is thin gruel.' (p.152).

Hebden weaves a rich narrative encompassing blog, auto-ethnography, scriptural interpretation, reflection on insights that resonate across world faiths, the 'how-to' manual and political comment. He moves between these with ease from paragraph to paragraph. The pace is fast. I desire further clarification and at times statements that are less sweeping. I appreciate their punch. He is negotiating new space, and here is writing is innovative.

Hebden is creating a fertile conversation between disciplines. He has used various strands of thinking and with integrity melded them into a robust treasure trove that enriches his practice as activist. He is intentional in seeking to spiritually resource those who wish to engage meaningfully as a local diverse community and/or national network in confronting oppression.

'We must be whistle-blowers against the powers that leave some of us destitute or oppressed.' (p. 15).

He has many examples. The liturgy of the Christian Church, his given and chosen spiritual home, overflows into the community and is enacted on the streets of Mansfield. Gathering together those committed to the common good and fighting oppression in terms of the provision of poor housing, he uses ritual in the public space. Hebden as priest calls people involved in confrontation 'to share the peace'. This approach is radical and transformative.

How is this activism possible? I suggest by hearing the stories of others over the sharing of food, connecting with the resources of scripture, and knowing the context of his activism. Hebden's knowledge concerning Mansfield's textile past and his related decision to learn to use the drop spindle give substance to his work. He enchants resources that others might reject and liberates ideas so that they might have a new life. He clearly also has tremendous energy and inspires others to work with him.

I was both intrigued and delighted to see Hebden's exploration of Christian anarchy and how it might be a positive route to social change. This risk-taking reminds me of Bishop David Jenkins, who mentions anarchy in his inspirational book *Free to Believe*, yet leaves it underdeveloped there. This is an example of how I needed a little more information that would come from increased referencing of ideas and provision of a bibliography. However, I appreciate how this might have interrupted his flow.

There was more opportunity for how creative prayer and corporate prayer underpinned this re-enchanted activism. This angle, promised in chapter two, should be given more attention.

I hope this book is read, reread and reprinted. This would provide opportunity for an authorial revision and a second proof reading. There is too frequent repetition, for example around Simone Weil, and too many mistakes in the text, especially words missed out. These quibbles should be given attention, but not be overplayed. The vision of Dr Watson and her staff deserve applause. More please.

Keith Thomasson is Senior Chaplain and Spirituality Advisor for Alabaré Christian Care and Support based in Salisbury. Keith is interested in shared leadership and the interface between church and chaplaincy. He directs the New Sarum Singers. ■

Observations from the Student Christian Movement at Modern Church Council

Ellis Tsang, SCM Fundraising & Communications Officer

How do we provide a safe refuge for Christians who want to ask questions, be inclusive, and are open to other beliefs and perspectives?

This was the question that kept coming up during the recent Modern Church council meeting at Hinsley Hall, Leeds. It's the question I ask every day at the Student Christian Movement (SCM), where we reach out to students who might be a little lost in their faith, caught between an aggressive form of conservative evangelicalism and the busy-ness of university life and culture. How do we create a space for these people that combines an open and cutting-edge approach to theology, with a faith that is relevant to their lives and enriches them as young people in the world? The answer might lie in our idea of what theology is.

Theology doesn't stand on its own, as a separate altar to be studied and kept closed off from the rest of life. Connecting students to an open and inclusive theology means connecting theology to all aspects of life. Theology connects to our spiritual lives, informing how we pray and worship. It connects to our public lives, challenging how we treat other people within public and online spaces. It connects to our careers and vocations, guiding us through tough choices. As SCM blogger Rebekah Blyth recently put it:

We don't just think or talk theology – we do it; as part of our worship – the songs we sing, both musically and lyrically, what our places of worship look like, what customs and rituals we take part in, what creeds and/or prayers we say, the way we interact with other people in our churches. We also do theology in any conversations we might have with other people about God. And we do theology through the many varied ways that Christians live out their faith through their actions and through demonstrating God's love in the world.

We want to encourage and resource students actively to do theology: to have conversations about the varied and rich ideas about God we don't normally talk about in church or other 'Christian' settings; to encounter people of different faiths and beliefs, learning from them and building dialogue and understanding; to bring people together through inclusive liturgies and prayers, welcoming all into



communion with the divine; and to make a difference in the world, challenging structures of power and enabling change to happen in society.

This is our vision of a Christian faith for students, whether in universities, local churches or wider society. SCM is working towards achieving this vision in the next five years by working more locally with students themselves, giving them the skills and confidence as leaders to run local groups on campus and help make churches a more accepting and caring place for all.

In September, we are also planning to expand our work in schools and local churches, running youth workshops and discussions for 16-18 year-olds that encourage them to explore an open and inclusive faith at university. This support will be vitally needed in the years to come, especially at such a critical transition period, when many young people are finding out who they are and need to know there's a spiritual home for them.

As a Modern Church member, you can be a part of making this possible by joining our Friends Network. SCM Friends not only support SCM through prayer and funding, but also share their experiences and insights with students at events, local group meetings or within churches. Find out more and sign up as a Friends today by visiting movement.org.uk/friends.

For those who are wondering about their identity, but afraid they won't be accepted; for those questioning the role and nature of faith, but never allowed to ask; for those seeking a Christianity that cares about equality, peace and justice, but not given an opportunity to act – you can help build a community that provides a safe refuge to do theology and encounter the fullness of God.

If you would like to find out more about SCM, please visit movement.org.uk or send us an email on scm@movement.org.uk. ■