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## Editorial: The Church beyond the Church?

*Anthony Woollard*

This edition comes out at about the time of our Annual Conference on ritual, worship and culture. We may expect to be reminded that 'ritual' is by no means limited to what goes on in churches or other sacred spaces. Ritual (let alone 'ritualists') may not have had a good press in certain parts of the Church, but it is alive and well in places where its presence might be least expected. The 'anti-ritual' of the Quakers has its ritualistic features, as does some evangelical and charismatic worship. Football clubs may be ritualistic, as may aspects of work and politics. And, if most mainstream church rituals appear meaningless to the vast majority of the population most of the time, there are still occasions such as Christmas, and even, for a surprising number, weddings and baptisms, when they can touch hearts and draw people together.

Ritual helps to confirm identity. This applies even where it is purely individual, as in some New Age spirituality or in many aspects of everyday life. (Not just in the human sphere either; my dog is the most ritualistic creature I know.)

And, in particular, corporate ritual forms communities - for good or ill. Even (perhaps especially) in this individualistic age, people feel the need for that. So, what might be the meaning of ritual in the everyday world?

David Jennings, in his article below, raises the question - which was also at the heart of the April 2018 edition of *Modern Believing* - of 'the Church beyond the Church': those who rarely if ever appear in our pews on a Sunday; who do not (as some of us do) conceive

## Modern Church

**General Secretary:** Very Revd Dr Jonathan Draper **email:** [gensec@modernchurch.org.uk](mailto:gensec@modernchurch.org.uk)

**Administrator:** Diane Kutar **email:** [office@modernchurch.org.uk](mailto:office@modernchurch.org.uk) **tel:** 0845 345 1909

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

**Editor:** Anthony Woollard **email:** [signsofthetimes@modernchurch.org.uk](mailto:signsofthetimes@modernchurch.org.uk) **tel:** 01789 204923

**Book Reviews Editor:** Chris Savage **email:** [chrissavage@gmail.com](mailto:chrissavage@gmail.com)

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

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of the Church's central ritual, the Eucharist, as constitutive of their life's very meaning; and yet who do respond, in individual and often collective ways, to some idea of Mystery. How can we, in turn, respond to their response?

If corporate ritual is a collective action which expresses a sense of meaning for its participants, then it has a vital power which we must respect. It may have been grossly misused in human history - one thinks of the Third Reich. Even the most authentic Christian rituals are not without their ambiguities and have been misused. The anti-ritualists among us need to be heard, and their warnings against idolatry (uncomfortably close to those of the Old Testament prophets) heeded. But that is not an argument for throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

But can - indeed should - ritual bind people together at all? I have said that our age is individualistic. The very concept of 'binding together' can recall the ancient Roman *fascis*, the bundles of twigs which became the emblem of Fascism. Are we not, today, all on *different* 'journeys', to use a fashionable concept in contemporary spirituality? Or is that too lonely an image? Is there a thoroughly Anglican *via media* between individualism and Fascism?

Brenda Watson's article is the first instalment in her survey of the idea of the Grand Narrative and its loss in postmodernism. Any group of people, be they a club, a church, a town, a nation, needs some sort of story to enable them to assert some kind of common identity. The idea of a Grand Narrative which might bind people together across a wider canvas is unfashionable. Yet people yearn for a story that they can share as universally as possible. We need to belong - and not just to a cosy in-group with its own exclusive story, but to the whole human race. The Christian story, the old Grand Narrative of the West, served that purpose once in its own way, but its shortcomings in an ecumenical and pluralistic world have become all too clear. We may appreciate Tolkien's argument, in his famous essay *On Fairy Stories*, that *all* stories ultimately point to the one Story which Christians affirm - but we certainly cannot impose that on others. Rather, we must listen to their stories - and weave stories together, where we can in order to create something new.

A case in point has been the recent BBC TV series *Civilisations*. The original series, *Civilisation*, fronted almost 50 years ago by the late Kenneth Clark, did quite clearly assume a Grand Narrative of Western art and culture. This will not do any longer. But the alternative is not simply the affirmation of a whole lot of parallel narratives.

The new series, though somewhat discontinuous in its thematic approach, found remarkable connections, not least between East and West. Might a new cultural narrative emerge from that?

David Jennings' article is another example rather closer to home. The approach to ecclesiology here described is very close to that of our Vice-President, Martyn Percy, who in his many writings has defended a classic idea of the Church of England - not a sect amongst many, but still in some sense the Church of the whole nation. There is a narrative here also - not, any more, unduly grand, but firmly and normatively rooted in the tradition and yet open to the new, and to the narratives of others, out of which dialogue new stories may emerge. Meanwhile, David Simon offers an interpretation of key concepts in the Christian narrative - sin and atonement - which reflects ongoing dialogues about human nature, not just amongst Christians but also in non-Christian philosophy as demonstrated in John Gray's recent *Seven Types of Atheism*. Gerald Downing picks up briefly on the debate in the last issue about the Trinity. And our Australian correspondent, John Bunyan, reflects on Angela Tilby's dove-cote-fluttering article in the *Church Times* at the end of April, in which she argues that one narrative about the Church of England, broadly promoted by Percy, is in danger of being replaced by another of a rather less generous kind, broadly associated with Holy Trinity Brompton.

The book group in my church recently read Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*. That clearly has at its heart a Grand Narrative: a view of life, and a set of practices, seeming almost redolent of pre-Revolution rural France, though its setting is that of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The people may not go to church much, or believe much in conventional terms, yet the church and the priest are at the centre of their collective life. Bernanos' hero, physically and spiritually weak and ill as he is, tries to make that narrative live afresh. Yet at the end, collapsing from cancer and unable to receive the Last Rites, his final words are: 'What does it matter? Grace is everywhere.'

Perhaps we shall find the same truth from our Conference. Grace is everywhere, and everywhere it needs to be embodied in narrative and ritual. Our task, without losing faith with the rituals that nurture us, is to support that embodiment. Then the reality of the Church will indeed spread beyond its boundaries, and we can begin to see liturgies and narratives which are inclusive rather than exclusive. □

## Is a refreshed Grand Narrative for the West possible?

Brenda Watson

Shakespeare could take for granted nurture in Christian beliefs which gave validation to those values of truth/integrity, justice/goodness and respect for all/compassion which his plays communicate. Those who see and love Shakespeare may imbibe these values, but they need to be clearly articulated and consciously nurtured for the many to be similarly influenced.

In the modern world these values are no longer firmly grounded. Historically they represent the branches and fruit of a tree that has now been mostly axed, or to vary the metaphor, they have been transferred to a site not strong enough to support them. For the new site relies not on any understanding of Christian belief which used to supply the cement for holding society together, but on a vague expectation, supported by reason and the rule of law, of general goodwill among humans.

Hywel Williams, writing in 1999 about his *History of the World*, notes: 'Ours is the age which has seen the end of the grand narrative in the arts and sciences.' The taxi-driver who asked Bertrand Russell 'What's it all about then, Bert?' and failed to get an answer, may be apocryphal but it is also revelatory. Our economy may be global, but not our explanations. Christian, Positivist, Marxist, Freudian: all have had their day in the sun of acclamation as they offered an illusion of total understanding.

The sense of a vacuum at the heart of Western civilisation is palpable today. Can its Grand Narrative be revised so as to correct what has been amiss?

Mention of a Grand Narrative, however, is likely to raise many hackles. Readers of articles on Pyrotheology in *Modern Believing* (57:4) may agree with the post-modernist dismissal of all Grand Narratives. Yet isn't postmodernism functioning as a kind of Grand Narrative itself, portraying all traditions as no more than power-machines in competition with each other? It holds that there is no possibility of attaining truth but only of existential quest that can never be satisfied but only lived.

Postmodernism can be critiqued on many grounds. For example, it proclaims the abandonment of truth yet it does so claiming that that is true; its central notion is therefore self-refuting. The articles referred to above speak of the need for embracing uncertainty with remarkable certainty! Moreover, postmodernism is obsessive in failing to see other

factors operating other than the pursuit of power and its ramifications. To assume that this is the only valid perspective from which to view the world is clearly partisan.

In the real world, as opposed to that of the armchair critic, a Grand Narrative is essential to hold society together. Accepting pluralism has to be on the basis of what is shared and agreed, otherwise the danger is anarchy, not community. The West appears to have failed here. As Jeffrey Stout in his far-ranging book *Democracy and Tradition* noted: 'We are not used to discussing what, if anything, links us together.'

Yet a kind of consensus is at work, permitting the regular, everyday use of the term 'the West'. Anthony Woollard, in *Signs of the Times* October 2016, speaking of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, asked:

**'How far do we use that trinity of ideological changes as itself a grand narrative to be idolized?'**

Steven Pinker in his new book *Enlightenment Now* is confident that all we need is what the first Age of Enlightenment gave us: science, reason and humanism. He fails to see the limitations of this austere trio.

Any improved Grand Narrative for the West needs to correct at least three flaws such an overview. The first concerns its failure to nurture, so far as possible in everyone, those values truly foundational for any thriving civilization. These may be expressed as the classic values of commitment to search for truth, justice, compassion and beauty. They constitute the life-blood of any genuinely-claimed democracy.

Yet despite its elaborate and expensive education systems and marvellous, hitherto unknown, means of communicating through media and internet etc., the West has instead tended to highlight ideological political values capable of supporting gross individualism. Values such as freedom of speech and tolerance are not of universal application because they depend for their validity on deeper values being in place.

The truly foundational values discourage one of the greatest dangers facing civilization: dogmatism. The Grand narrative which is needed should be minimal. It should acknowledge levels of uncertainty requiring on-going courteous disputation with an emphasis on the word *courtesy*.

I think such a Grand Narrative may be possible if the other two flaws in current thinking generally are addressed. Two further articles will look at these. □

## Ecclesiology - what's that?

David Jennings

The discipline of ecclesiology is the study of the church. What can be said of use about the contemporary church and its relevance and meaning?

If a stranger arriving at a town railway station were to enquire where the church was, a local might well point to a large building in the centre of the town, possibly with a prominent spire or tower. Those of us involved in the church know better: the church building is not to be confused with the church, the *ecclesia*, the community of the people of God. But do we not often confuse this ourselves? Sometimes we refer to the 'church family'. This begs an understanding of family that often can be exclusive, and even with a common understanding of what it is to be in a family, the definition is stretched when applied to those attending church, many of whom would not form part of what might be called a traditional family. Often it can be difficult to penetrate the walls of the family. It is recorded that a visiting bishop, observing the church notice board proclaiming that 'all are welcome', asked the congregation what part of the word 'all' they did not understand! A further confusion, especially in respect of the Church of England, is talk of church members. The Church of England is not a membership church with appropriate lists and subscriptions, though some might echo the words of Hamlet,

**'a consummation devoutly to be wished'.**

The defining category for the C of E is parishioner rather than member. Membership of the church is conveyed through the sacrament of holy baptism; the liturgist Professor Paul Bradshaw once opined that baptism is the unrepeatable rite of initiation and the eucharist the repeatable rite.

How then can we describe and speak about the church; what could be a relevant and inclusive ecclesiology? The great Dutch Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx suggested that,

**'We need a bit of negative ecclesiology, church theology in a minor key, in order to do away with the centuries-long ecclesiocentrism of the empirical phenomenon of 'Christian religion': for the sake of God, for the sake of Jesus the Christ and for the sake of humankind' (Church: The Human Story of God, SCM Press 1990).**

This represents a challenge for any church as it seeks to understand the human predicament and any appropriate ecclesiastical response that remains faithful to God in Christ in the contemporary

situation. There is a real sense in which the Church must be seeking to constantly renew and reform. Such has been evidenced in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council, significant changes in the C of E, not least through liturgical renewal (the place where Anglican doctrine is to be experienced), and the ecumenical movement. For the C of E, the parish church is the locus of the church, its activities and its mission, and such should be both affirmed and supported, not least by well-trained and competent parish priests. Furthermore, the parish church should be one of the foci within the community for issues arising and associated with the same. The church that loves and supports the community amongst whom it is set exposes itself to the risk of being loved in return. Giles Ecclestone pointed out,

**'applying this to the church at the local level, we can say that where members of the community project their concern about the meaning of life and death onto the parish church, and the clergy and congregation willingly accept these projections, then a fruitful encounter can follow. But if the local church does not accept such projections, both 'good' and 'bad', positive and negative, then the church becomes increasingly cut off from its community' (The Parish Church?, edited by Giles Ecclestone, A R Mowbray 1988).**

Other projections can be equally important for the contemporary church.

At a time in the life of the Church when the parish church and parish clergy appear to be less valued and less resourced than other expressions of church life, both centrally and in new projects and programmes ostensibly designed and implemented to secure that rather nebulous concept called 'church growth', it is important to return to the presence of the parish church, which in itself can and must give added value to community life and engagement. Parishioners will see through the somewhat quaint vanity projects designed and implemented to get them into church, whilst often neglecting real issues both at local and national levels, together with major international concerns. Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank suggest that the parish church is the 'central emblem of Anglicanism', and the commitment to nation and community that it represents, is completely undervalued. One of the saddest elements of the original *Mission-shaped Church* report was its attitude to Christian tradition and to the parish church in particular. It seemed that the parish was being asked to die so that new forms of 'being church' might live' (*For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions*, SCM

Press, 2010). There is much to consider in the light of this critique, and there is much ecclesiology to engage with at the present time. Perhaps a challenge comes from Alan Billings (a priest ordained in Leicester Cathedral and now Police Commissioner for South Yorkshire) when he throws the gauntlet down:

**'How ironical if the place of religion in public life in this country were to be undermined not by aggressive atheists... but by a certain type of Christian. The real enemies of the Church of England may not be without but within. But while some of those who are trying to change fundamentally the nature of the Church of England know exactly what they are doing, there are many more who have not understood just what is at stake' (Lost Church: Why we must find it again, SPCK 2013).**

Billings final sections address finding the human in the divine, purposive presence, and modesty, humility, service. Good ecclesiological principles!

What is ecclesiology? A study of the Church for our times; recognising gifts already received and experienced, and challenges for the future. An ecclesiological warning, however, from Bishop Richard Holloway:

**'its very existence now threatened, the Church is in danger of becoming a club for strict believers...'(Waiting for the Last Bus: Reflections on Life and Death, Canongate Books 2018). □**

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## **What did Jesus ever do for us? A meditation on the Atonement**

David Simon

### **Introduction**

*This article derives from meditations for Holy Week 2018.*

There is a scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* where John Cleese, leader of the People's Front of Judea, asks 'What have the Romans ever done for us'. The characters start being sceptical about the presence of the Romans, assuming it has been wholly exploitative, then they spot more and more things the Romans have contributed to their society.

Following a list of advances the Romans brought to the region, the leader says: 'Alright, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?'

The joke was that although the presence of the Romans was dismissed as a mere exploitative nuisance, they had in fact contributed hugely to society.

### **So, what did Jesus ever do for us?**

#### **I What is Sin**

##### Use of the term in secular culture

There is a tendency, because of the way our secularised culture uses the word 'sin', to think of sin as being something greater, or even something less than, the real thing.

Something as simple as eating a cream cake is described as sinful - 'naughty but nice' - which suggests that sin is really nothing to worry about, indeed it might be an enjoyable indulgence.

Much of the media revels in sexual misdemeanours and these are often thought of as the most important sinful aspects of human behaviour - as if everything to do with sex was wrong and sinful. In doing this the media is, of course, appealing to our own human curiosity and appetites - an appetite that is natural and instinctive because without it the human race would die out.

At the other extreme, many things which, were we to think carefully about them we would recognise as very harmful (for example, some ways of making money), are not considered as sin, whether legal or illegal.

So, in today's secular usage the term sin isn't aligned with the civil or criminal law - which makes it rather confusing when trying to understand a gospel message that says there is some sort of link between Jesus' death and our sins.

##### Religious origins of the term

Sin comes from a religious understanding of the world, as seen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, so is bound up with an idea of God. This is probably why, in today's Western secular culture, the word has lost any precise meaning. But even within a religious framework, ideas have changed about what human actions are sinful. In Numbers 15:32-36 picking up sticks on the Sabbath is regarded as a sin, for which the penalty was death.

In the traditional Christian religious view, breaking the commandments - the ten in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5, or the two (both from the Old Testament - Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18) given by Jesus as the summary of the Law in Matthew 22:35-40 - is sinful.

### Sin as undermining loving relationship

To break the commandments is to fail to love, either God or one's neighbour, and since God created all that is, and has seen that it is good, to fail to love any part of God's creation is to fail to love God. Thus, to fail to love a neighbour is to fail to love God.

Although we may find it difficult (or even impossible) to envisage God, we do know from our human experience what it is to love. If we have a partner we know that love for that partner is expressed through what we do and say to and about that partner. The same can be said about children, or parents.

Certain actions and words and thoughts will enable that love to be shown and that relationship to grow creatively while other actions and words will undermine and even destroy that relationship.

Here I have used the two words which I believe give us the way to understand sin: those words are 'love', and 'relationship'. When we do something that undermines a relationship with another person we are not being loving either to that person or to those who love that person. It might be undermining that person's own sense of security or worth or undermining them in the eyes of others or undermining their relationship with others. This is something we as human beings can understand. And since we know that God loves each and every human being we can understand that the relationship God wants with and between all of us is the sort of relationship we would want with and between all those people we love.

This also explains why the commandments refer to the historical consequences of breaking them - that God will punish the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God but showing love to the thousandth generation of those who love God - not only does the undermining of the relationship affect those around us now, but it is also affects expectations and is passed on to the next and subsequent generations. If you need a current and proximate illustration consider the involvement of England with Ireland over the past five centuries.

Sin is anything that undermines relationship - it's not about eating cream cakes, it's not all about sex and it includes things that can be legal and surprisingly might not include some things that are illegal.

### Sin in summary

Sin is the deliberate or avoidable breaking of the relationship with God - that's what we have to recognise, confess, and as far as possible avoid.

## **2 What is sacrifice**

### The temple cult

In the desert, when the Israelites were escaping from Egypt, and at the Temple in Jerusalem (once it was built), the Jews had a complex system of offering sacrifices to God: in gratitude for what had been received (the offering of the first male offspring of domestic animals and the first fruits of the ground); for gratitude for delivery from slavery in Egypt (the feast of booths); and for repentance from sin (day of atonement, the scapegoat etc.)

One way of understanding this is to think of sacrifice in terms of human relations, then extend it to God. This would have made sense in an age where it was thought that there was a three-decker universe and that God (or the gods) lived out of sight but above the clouds and meddled in human affairs.

### Showing gratitude

Sacrifices showing gratitude would be appropriate to keep the gifts coming from the donor. This might be a bountiful God or a bountiful earth. And returning part of the gift to the donor, like returning fertilizer to the earth to generate plentiful crops next season, would be a sign of appreciation and an expression of hope for continued beneficence. Clearly the sacrificial gift must be of good quality to indicate the thankfulness of the giver - second rate goods would undermine the message being communicated by the sacrifice.

### Showing the value of partnership

If God were thought of as one's ally or partner, then continually offering gifts would be a way of showing appreciation for the alliance, just as one might make gifts to one's partner to assure them that they are important and loved. Clearly the sacrificial gift must be of good quality to indicate the importance of the relationship to the giver - second rate goods would undermine the message the sacrifice communicates.

### Placating an angry person or god

If God were thought of as an angry god who needed placating there could be a whole range of ways of understanding the sacrifice. To help illustrate this I will use an example the story of Jacob - who had on two occasions deprived his twin (but elder) brother Esau of his rights as the elder - coming back to his homeland after having fled from the wrath of his brother (Genesis Chapters 25-32).

What Jacob is doing is trying to entreat the favour of Esau which can be thought in several ways:

- a gift;
- a simple bribe;

- an acknowledgement that Jacob had been in the wrong;
  - Jacob paying the penalty (however determined) for having done wrong to Esau;
  - an attempt to compensate Esau for the losses incurred because of Jacob's wrongdoing;
  - a demonstration of Jacob's good will and a lack of enmity (though that could also be a trap so recipients might need to be wary);
  - a demonstration of Jacob's commitment of loyalty to Esau, first by giving up something that is valuable; and
  - a sign of Jacob's renunciation of the sort of way of life that had led to the rift in relations between Jacob and Esau.
- expression of gratitude;
  - expression of the importance of the relationship;
  - attempt to ensure continued beneficence;
  - attempt to placate an angry person or god;
  - payment of a bribe;
  - paying a penalty;
  - acknowledgement of wrongdoing;
  - paying compensation;
  - demonstrating good will;
  - making a commitment of loyalty;
  - signalling an intention to change.

### 3 Atonement

(or 'How Jesus deals with our sins')

#### Repentance

In the story of Joseph recounted in Genesis 37-45, Joseph has his brother Benjamin framed for theft of his drinking cup. This miscarriage of justice might seem horrific to us and could be seen as undermining the morality of the story. In order to help remove this anxiety so we can continue to use the story, I will rely on a helpful strand of thought in Judaism (*Maimonides*, reported by Jonathan Sachs in *Not in God's Name* p.154). This argues that repentance is about being in the same decision situation again but choosing the good / generous / selfless / constructive course of action rather than the destructive course of action previously chosen. The older brothers had the opportunity to let Benjamin 'take the rap' and be killed, just as they had earlier been prepared to hate and abandon Joseph. But they didn't - and Joseph, seeing this, understands that they do indeed repent of what they had done and do act differently when placed in the same (or a very similar) situation.

#### Redemption (or bringing good out of the bad)

In the Joseph narrative, despite the jealousies and miscarriages of justice leading to terrible things happening to Joseph (and his father and even his brothers), a good outcome is made possible. The family is saved from starvation, and relationships are restored when Joseph forgives his brothers.

That good outcome from the bad is what we can call 'redemption'. While the word 'redemption' can be understood as the paying of a ransom to get back something that has been lost or stolen, it can also be the 'coming good' of something that was bad, however attained (even if without the paying of a ransom). While there is likely to be a personal cost involved to one or more of the parties, in retrospect that cost can be seen to have been worth it and might even have been willingly borne.

#### The consequences of broken relationships

Whether today we need to think of God in the same way as did the ancient Israelites is doubtful, but clearly there is still a great deal of instinctive thinking about God (especially as portrayed in the media) that mirrors those ancient historical concepts that are clear for us to read in the Bible - as we read in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 in the second of the commandments where the people are not to make graven images, God is portrayed as a jealous God visiting the sins of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generations. And that thinking can in some ways be helpful to us because the consequences of our actions and broken relationships do echo down the centuries.

In this the word relationship is important because, as suggested earlier, the essence of sin is the deliberate or avoidable breaking of the relationship with God. So, we can see sacrifice - as illustrated in the story of Jacob and Esau - as being an attempt to restore a broken relationship.

What is abundantly clear is that if it is about relationship, then it will be no good trying to do it on the cheap, because if the other party sees through that then the situation will be at least as bad, and possibly worse than it was before. Hence, sacrifice is necessarily personally costly, otherwise it is neither genuine nor can it be expected to be effective.

#### Sacrifice in summary

Sacrifice is the offering of something that is costly to us in order to create, maintain or restore relationship

It's not just paying the penalty (like a conviction or fine for breaking the law, where one might consider the trade-off between the cost and benefit) it is much more nuanced and can include many or even all of the elements of:

### The cost of redemption

An example of this willingness to bear the cost is evident in the parable we know as the Prodigal Son, reported as spoken by Jesus (Luke 15:11-32). In this parable, effectively the younger son, in asking for his inheritance now, is wishing his father to be dead - and the normal communal response would be to treat the younger son as if he were dead. The relationship would have been at a dead end. That is the line that is taken by the elder brother, so it is clear that there is no love lost between the brothers.

The father, however, gladly bears the cost of being conned and humiliated in order to have back the relationship with his younger and errant son. Then he has to try to build (or rebuild) a relationship with the elder son because he wants them to be a family again.

The father will have to bear a further cost, as will the younger son, if the family is to be restored, and the situation redeemed. The cost may be financial (as was the initial breach) but until it is the personal cost of love, the healing will not take place.

Surprisingly, it is not the errant younger son (alone) who makes the sacrifice of admitting his error and attempting to sell himself back to his father as a slave, but the father makes the greater sacrifice. The father has provided all the financial resources for the sons, and risks being seen as a gullible fool in the eyes of his elder son and his community. There are at least two sacrifices here to redeem the wrongdoing.

### God, Jesus and us

What has any of this to do with us, two thousand years after Jesus' life and four thousand years after Joseph's life?

Clearly each one of us has an inbuilt tendency to selfishness - it's instinct, because without it we would not have survived as babies and grown to adulthood. That tendency, when indulged, undermines our relationships with other people and so with God, even if not with God directly. That can be described as sin - it is a deliberate or avoidable breaking of relationship.

When relationships are broken, the world is a worse place. However, a mechanism for restoring broken relationships, over the centuries, has been codified as sacrifice. Sacrifice is not just a simple bribe or ransom - it subtly enables trust to be re-established and relationships to be rebuilt.

To mend our broken relationship we need to repent, to turn so that if we were in the same situation again we would act differently. We need to show that, and so we might undertake something costly to us in order to do so. In other words, our sin requires a

sacrifice. However, like the Prodigal Son, we have nothing that has not come from our God, so we have nothing of our own to offer - except perhaps ourselves (again like the Prodigal Son returning).

None of this is news to God, who already knows all that we have willed and done. God, like the father in the Prodigal Son parable, Isaac in Jacob and Esau's story, and Jacob in the story of Joseph and his brothers, wants the family whole again. So God sets out to meet us.

Thus, I argue, it is God who comes to us in human form in Jesus, prepared to pay any price, to put up with anything, to restore the broken relationship. History shows that some people 2,000 years ago rejected that offer in ways that led to God's suffering death on a cross. The resurrection shows that God has not been defeated in the quest to restore the family relationship. The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost shows that God is still here with us every day, offering at whatever cost to God's self to restore the relationship with each one of us here and now.

### Atonement in summary

- **It is in Jesus that God comes to us to restore and cement the relationship between humans and God;**
- **Jesus is not our sacrifice to God, but God's sacrifice of himself to us;**
- **God comes to restore the covenant.**

**That's what Jesus has done for us, leaving us with the question: 'how will we respond?' □**

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## **Angela Tilby's column 'Deliver us from the Evangelical takeover' (Church Times, 27<sup>th</sup> April): A Sydney Anglican response**

*John Bunyan*

Canon Tilby's article is all too relevant to the few liberals left in Sydney Diocese, where a very radical conservative Evangelical takeover is almost complete.

With major changes in the last 20 years, neo-puritanism is now dominant amongst the clergy. A small number of ministers retain the conservative evangelical but recognisably Anglican approach of Archbishops Loane, Robinson and Goodhew. But in parochial positions there are now no liberals, only a few 'liberal catholic' clergy of a rather elite 'affirming Catholicism' kind, and hardly any 'middle of the road'.

Moore Theological College has been a major influence in all this, but also the long-standing Anglican Church



League (ACL) with what Archdeacon R. B. S. Hammond called its 'carnal' party politics.

Archbishop Loane was amazed at the changes occurring even in his time (1966-1982), and it is fair to say that, despite being different in important respects from that of the Church of England, our experience since then should be considered alongside Angela Tilby's and Martyn Percy's thoughtful writings. Sydney's story shows that Evangelical Anglicanism can become much more extreme and intolerant.

The saddest thing is the effect of all this on people, as Canon Tilby says, 'patronised by the saved and the certain'. My last post was as Rector of a lively middle-class broad-church BCP parish. Before and since retirement in 2001, as an honorary Anglican hospital chaplain (unnoticed and unapproved by the diocese), I have probably met more than 22,000 patients who identify as Anglican (mostly), Protestant or Orthodox on weekly visits; but local clergy will rarely respond to emergency calls, few ever visit even their own churchgoers, and the diocese has been unable to find even one priest to join our team as a paid half-time chaplain since this ministry is not 'evangelistic'!

As for many churchgoers, Canon Tilby is right in what she says about the abandonment of 'traditional religion', in parts of Sydney impossible to find. On Sundays I take two hours by bus and train to get to a 'normal' service, and some others undertake similar long journeys, but many either endure endless talk of heaven and hell for the sake of friends and fellowship or, much more often, cease to attend at all. 'There's a wideness in God's mercy', Faber's hymn reminds us, and of course we are all in need of that mercy, aware of our own narrowness in some respects, but - as I try to be through my books - seeking to be enthusiastic for truth, and at least endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

*John Bunyan is a licensed priest of the Diocese of Sydney, a parishioner of St John the Baptist Canberra and adherent of St Stephen's Uniting Church in Sydney, and a member of Kings' Chapel, Boston USA. As well as being an honorary C of E hospital chaplain, he is also Honorary Chaplain of the Australian Intelligence Corps Association and a member of various conservationist, theological, liturgical, musical and historical organisations.*

Read Martyn Percy's view 'Whose kingdom are we building? Leading Christian theologian challenges Church of England ahead of #ThyKingdomCome global prayer campaign' on the Modern Church website: [modernchurch.org.uk](http://modernchurch.org.uk) □

## Triunity as friendship

*F. Gerald Downing*

Although to my mind Adrian Thatcher had the better of the argument with John Goodchild (on God as Trinity, *Signs of the Times*, April 2018), I suggest both would gain from a wider reading of the agreed sources, rather than relying on the theologians' common focus of abstract metaphysics. A much more promising and perhaps more engaging field would be ancient talk of 'friendship', both in the New Testament scriptures and in the 'Fathers' - the Cappadocians in particular.

There was ancient agreement that true friends were equal, spontaneously of one mind in everything, able to be frank with one another, open to each other. They had a shared ethos, a shared sense of the good and the just. And all their possessions were held in common. Friendship talk is in fact where the ancients come closest to our talk of 'persons in relationships'. The most obvious early Christian example is Luke's portrayal of the early Jesus movement in Jerusalem (Acts 2:43-47); but the elements of friendship talk occur much more widely in the New Testament canon. It is there in stated ideals for Christian community, but also of the relationship with followers that Jesus and God offer (e.g. John 15:13; Rom 5:6-11, and much more).

Significantly, in our New Testament, friendship talk is also part of God-talk as such (e.g. John 5:30, 8:28, 16:15, 17:10; 1 Cor 12:4-6). And much of this is clearly taken up by the Cappadocians, for instance, by Basil in *On the Holy Spirit*. 'Who has known the mind of the Lord?' expects the answer, the Word, in the light of Hebrews' and John's assurance that the Father has shown the Son everything and that the Son is in tune with the will of the Father. There is no hint, insists Basil, in the language used, of any servility (which would preclude friendship), not any other inequality. And within this perfect amity, friendship by nature, the Holy Spirit must be taken to be included, the Spirit who is able to make us of one mind with God. The

'inner relations' of Father, Son and Spirit are best seen as friendship.

In my essay 'Friends in God', *Anglican Theological Review* 97.3 (2015), pp. 485-496, I spelled this out in some detail. I guess that when the Fathers talk metaphysics, and deploy abstractions such as 'prosôpon', or the 'relationality' of words in abstract, they leave us cold. Friendship talk is much livelier, more assimilable; more 'personal', in something like our sense. □

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## Report on the South West regional meeting, Manvers Street Baptist Church, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Jonathan Draper

Twenty members (and friends) of *Modern Church* met in Bath on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May to hear Bob Reiss talk about his book *Sceptical Christianity* (reviewed in *Signs of the Times*, January 2017), and to discuss with him and each other a wide range of issues to do with articulating a credible faith today.

Bob took us through a bit of his own story, relating his theological development from Crusaders in the early days to being influenced by John Robinson and the interesting and creative theologians he encountered in Cambridge. This included an interesting aside about how, at one point, Cambridge seemed to lead the theological debate in the Church of England, but also how much of that debate seems to have stopped today, with the Church of England retreating into a defensive and conservative place.

Along with giving us an insight into his own theological development, Bob also engaged with a number of theologians in his lecture (Keith Ward, John Macquarrie, John Hick, Maurice Wiles, Geoffrey Lampe and others) who helped to shape his answer to the question of whether or not God is 'real' (with Macquarrie: God is not a 'being' but a way of approaching what we encounter in the universe and Being itself). We touched on the importance of having more teaching and discussion in churches about the nature, historical accuracy and use of the Bible. We touched on the usefulness of 'incarnation' as a category for understanding the relationship of Jesus to God, and on the small subjects of salvation and life after death. Above all, Bob spoke about the need for honesty in our discussion of all this in open and

respectful ways in the churches, virtues he showed in great abundance.

Participants spent time in smaller groups talking about the points Bob raised, then regathered for about 45 minutes of general discussion. Perhaps it was a sign of the average age as a group, but we did spend quite a bit of time talking about life after death, including an interesting discussion about so-called 'near-death experiences'. We talked about the apparent disconnect between church and society and how this might also relate to a lack of in-depth theological education among clergy (and bishops...). We talked about incarnation, and the need to understand God as a 'felt reality'. We also talked about the need for all Christians to be comfortable with uncertainty and not always to be seeking definitive answers to questions (which are probably not possible anyway).

We didn't, of course, come up with definitive answers ourselves, but we asked a lot of good questions, and Bob's lecture stimulated us to a lively and well-informed discussion, ably chaired by Paul Brett.

**The South West Group's next meeting is a full day on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> October when Stephen Parsons will lead a discussion on cults and the churches.** □

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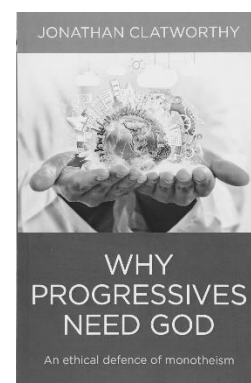
## BOOK REVIEWS

Jonathan Clatworthy, *Why progressives need God: An ethical defence of monotheism* (Christian Alternative Books 2017)

**Does progress have a future?**

In a world dominated by such powerful demi-gods as Trump, Putin, Jinping Xi, Kim Jong-Un, Duterte, Erdogan (reminiscent of the Graeco-Roman pantheon but with less gender balance), is belief in the unity of humanity, human rights, equality or freedom sustainable? Or are we condemned to slide into a chaotic world where nativism and emotivist rhetoric dominate and 'might' simply 'is right'? Is hope for a better world misplaced and naïve?

This is the issue that lies at the heart of this wide-ranging and ambitious book - as much a critique of



secular culture and thinking as a defense of monotheism. In a nutshell, Clatworthy argues that those who believe it is possible to build a better society and who wish to work towards that actively should take another look at monotheism. For, he argues, progressive beliefs find both their historic provenance and most coherent expression in monotheism or, at least, in the version of Christianity for which Clatworthy makes a compelling case.

Clatworthy's analysis of contemporary progressive secular thinking, that it is parasitic on Christianity, is a familiar one. Secularity has ditched the dogma, yet doesn't just cling to Christian values, but rather relies on them to undergird the foundations of progressive liberal thought; to pin together the increasingly shaky house that is 'Western values' in the face of those with the power to assert their wills and agendas.

*Why progressives need God* is then a work of natural theology that builds a defense of theism on the grounds that ethics, or the sort of ethical account progressives seek, requires a transcendent anchorage. Much of the book is thus given over to a discussion of the historical relationship between polytheism, monotheism and atheism, and a rehearsal of familiar arguments about the problem of evil. Following an historical account of the breakthrough to monotheism within exilic Judaism firmly located 'in a situation of absolute political hopelessness', Clatworthy argues that monotheism with its ideas of systemic unity and linear time makes the scientific enterprise possible and 'produces a distinctive ethical agenda' tied to egalitarianism and the idea of universal progress.

Such arguments, and the idea that secularism is living off inherited moral capital, have been made repeatedly. What is perhaps more distinctive is the idea that, as these values become further eroded, there is simply no defense against the assertion of raw power, and that as a consequence, as the ruling powers move into the resultant vacuum, the secular space will increasingly mimic many of the features of polytheism.

However sympathetic one is to the core arguments, it is difficult to ignore the fact that this book overreaches. The quality of support for the argument is patchy. There are a number of places where the arguments of scholars are introduced with insufficient regard for intellectual context or provenance; a number of key concepts are insufficiently explained (e.g. the Axial Age); in certain areas the scholarship is dated; and, there are some obvious omissions. For example, Clatworthy draws on the work of the sociologist Rodney Stark yet ignores that of David

Martin whose contributions to the area under discussion are highly pertinent.

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies with Clatworthy's approach to the history of monotheism: this is very broad-brush and as such endangers the core arguments. First of all, in reality, he actually means Christianity - there is, for example, no account of Islam here. Second, his historic reading of Christianity is framed by a simple binary: monotheism 'from below' and 'from above' denoting respectively an acceptable and authentic Christianity and an imperialist perversion. Yet little rationale is offered for this under-worked categorization or its validity. In a similar vein, summary historical judgments about a pessimistic medieval Christianity ruled by a 'cruel God' render this book's broader arguments vulnerable to critique. The text is crying out for a deeper analysis of the relationship between Christianity and power.

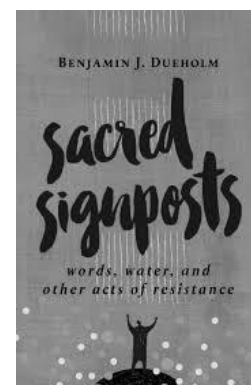
Nevertheless, Clatworthy presents a reasoned and reasonable case for traditional Christianity and raises important questions about the myopic quality of much contemporary secularity. One would sincerely hope that a secular progressive person 'of good faith' would want to explore the important central claim of this volume - that secular ethics are primarily derivative and in need of divine assistance.

*The Revd Duncan Dormor is the General Secretary of USPG (United Society Partners in the Gospel).* □

**Benjamin Dueholm,  
*Sacred signposts: Words,  
water and other acts of  
resistance* (Wm B  
Erdmanns 2018)**

In this book, Benjamin Dueholm, a Lutheran pastor from the USA, talks about sacred practices in a secular world, what they do and why they matter. He takes as his framework what Martin Luther called the 'holy possessions', starting naturally with the holy words of the sacred scriptures to be found in the Bible, and going on in successive chapters to talk about water (baptism), and meal (communion), confession and forgiveness, prayer, praise and worship, and last but by no means least, the cross and suffering.

Generally speaking, the book is written in an American journalese which sometimes grates if you are not familiar with the vocabulary (what on earth



are 'dumpster-divers'?) but which often stimulates with arresting turns of phrase and fresh ways of presenting the familiar. It is clearly addressed to a culture of decline in the Christendom of its European origins, through secularization, persecution and forced migration, exported to his own country since 1945.

The chapters are curiously uneven. In the sacramental section (chapters two and three) the one on water is a full exploration of a rite which enables outsiders to be insiders, taking biblical examples of those who become sons and daughters by adoption of the faith. He takes the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch as typical of the creation of a new community which transcends barriers, of

**'blood, wealth, language and purity'.**

He makes a useful connection to current issues and debate surrounding citizenship. Christendom, he claims, offers

**'gratuitous love and solidarity to a world of outsiders'.**

By contrast the chapter on meal is rather dense and philosophical but offers a critique of communion practices which reinforce social segregation among Protestants in a rite which should be radically social and inclusive, deriving from a simple household meal rather than the sacrificial altar-tables of basilicas.

Equally good is the chapter of worship for which Dueholm makes the case as

**'a liberating and necessary waste'.**

Prayer and worship, he maintains, should offer a challenge to the contemporary obsession with work in the secular culture we inhabit. He uses two striking images, of candles in the daylight and of bowls stolen back from the gods.

The best chapter is reserved to the end as he hinges his discussion of holy possessions, arising of course from the Protestant emphasis on scripture, and on the cross which he sees as the beginning and the end of all things. It is the inevitable consequence for the lonely God who needs to be social, setting out to save what he created in the drama of salvation centered on the cross where a crucified God reclaims humanity as his own. Luther's *theologia crucis* is put in the context of contemporary issues of racism and human slavery, of the violence experienced in church attacks like the one at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, USA. He contrasts the attempts to sanitize the cross in art and spirituality, in a culture of violence, in which the cross is a capstone,

**'the sin-canceling cherry on top of a good, rational, providential order visible to everyone'.**

If Dueholm has a mantra, it is this:

**'to be conformed in the image of Christ in this world is to be conformed to the image of the one who died as a forsaken outsider'.**

The holy possessions he sees as those things which make our separate identity in the world as those who challenge the powers of this world in the spirit of exodus and crucifixion.

**'So long as the Cross is there, it demands and proclaims an unconditional, essential identity of the church with the oppressed, the despised and the suffering.'**

And this book helps us to look at scripture and sacraments, ministry and mission, which form us in this Christian identity in a post-Christian age, leading us from cross to tomb.

Tim Macquiban is Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Ponte Sant'Angelo Rome. □

### In memory of Alex Elsmore 1995-2018



Our prayers go out to Guy Elsmore, our former General Secretary, and his family at the tragic loss of their son, a student at the University of Bristol. For them, our prayer and hope that 'grace is everywhere' will have a special meaning at this time. Chair of Modern Church Alan Race sent Guy a message on behalf of us all: 'Anyone who has been in ministry will know how devastating for any family this can be. Our prayers for everyone concerned have the advantage of going beyond words which are always inadequate in the face of such experiences. Please be assured of them as part of the threads of love that binds us all together.' □

<sup>1</sup> *People who recycle furniture etc. from skips - Ed.*