

# Signs of the Times

The newsletter of Modern Church

April 2015 Issue 57

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## Editorial: Does it matter?

*Anthony Woollard*

This summer, we look forward to our Annual Conference held jointly with the World Congress of Faiths: *Seeking the Sacred: Christianity in dialogue with other religions and the world*. It should be a remarkable convergence of people from widely divergent faith traditions, looking at what divides and unites us.

Historically, Modern Church has had a great interest in interfaith questions, stemming from its foundation in the late Victorian era when confrontation with other great world faiths led to questions about religious exclusiveness. The first half of the twentieth century saw the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, with its call for 'the evangelization of the world in this generation'; but also the statement by the mystical theologian Evelyn Underhill that 'there is no essential difference between Brahmin, Sufi and Christian mystics at their best'. Our commitment to dialogue is represented most recently in the writings of Alan Race, Chair of our forthcoming Conference, and Guy Elsmore's articles in recent editions of this newsletter.

Any easy assumption about dialogue has been rather challenged, of late, by the all too brutal and tragic resurgence of militant Islam (and other fundamentalisms). But that reflects tensions which have always been there in the interfaith arena. Meanwhile, quietly in the background, more and more common ground is found amongst 'liberals' in all faiths, particularly the Abrahamic faiths. ▶

## Modern Church

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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 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.

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

For some commentators, notably Karen Armstrong, that has suggested the possibility of a sort of world faith built on the orthopraxy of 'compassion', in which the distinctive features which seem to divide us so sharply are pushed into the background. I cannot help but observe that Graham Hellier appeared in our last issue to **question** such an approach (in the form presented by a previous contributor) – whilst Merryn Hellier appears in this issue to **commend** something rather like that same approach! Readers will have their own views on whether Graham was right to be so critical of Michael Wright's apparent espousal of the Armstrong thesis and to demand a more rigorous fundamental theology, or whether Merryn is right to imply that most of the theology that we discuss in these pages may be irrelevant. We need both challenges, and it is a feature of Modern Church that such debates go on. It is interesting also to note how Brenda Watson's article develops the argument.

I suspect, however, that most of the speakers at our Conference will **not** agree that details of belief, and even ritual, simply do not matter. Perhaps not all liberal Jews keep kosher and Shabbat as rigorously as their Orthodox brethren – for they share the conviction of Isaiah and Micah (and Merryn) that justice matters more. Yet most *will* continue to keep kosher and Shabbat, as part of their identity – precisely the identity out of which they feel they can contribute to that struggle for justice. Are they, and we, wrong to wrestle with the meaning of our identity, our history, our spirituality?

It may be, as Jeyan Anketell implies in his report on the day conference on Creeds, that the way these questions have been addressed in the past need refocusing today. And beyond liberal Western Christianity, as Merryn points out, questions of meaning may differ greatly from culture to culture, and some issues which seem highly relevant in one context may have little obvious resonance - perhaps even look like sheer distraction - in another. Yet surely Evelyn Underhill was not totally wrong in identifying a commonality across cultures in the ultimate spiritual quest, for human meaning. That quest is also reflected in Tim Belben's article about 'indwelling', which is ultimately mystical (yet ultimately practical) and not restricted to Christian believers or to religion as usually understood (for it may also relate to intimate human relationships).

I recently heard a Muslim speaker suggest that 'The best thing a Christian can do for Allah is to be a good

Christian, and the best thing that a Muslim can do for Jesus is to be a good Muslim'. We need to reaffirm, and struggle with, our authentic identity – the beliefs and practices that make us what we are as liberal Christians – if we are to play our part in the great parliament of faiths and of all humanity. In which case, perhaps we are asking at least some of the right questions in the ongoing work of Modern Church including Ian Duffield's concerns below, which have been exercising us a good deal of late.

We aim to address our 'questioning' remit particularly in our Annual Conferences. I offer a very early plug for that planned for **2016**, linking theology and Shakespeare on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Put the dates (11-13 July) in your diary now! We are developing an especially exciting line-up, under Alison Milbank as Chair. Details will be available at this year's conference.

There was no shortage of questions at our residential Council meeting at the end of February, and those, too, were questions that matter. Our last annual conference reminded us, in no uncertain terms, that we liberal Christians 'have a gospel to proclaim', but how do we do it? We looked in depth at the various ways in which we communicate, from the blog to our conferences to our journals and to the possibility of producing some kind of course on liberal Christianity, on which our General Secretary is actively working.

Our President was able to be with us for part of the time, and to remind us that we are those who can communicate with ordinary people, the ones who are left cold by ecclesiastical game-playing, and who may not always either believe or belong in an approved fashion, but who, not being against the Gospel, should be recognized as at least potentially being open to it. She reminded us that 'religion' consists of belief, of ritual, and of everyday living, and it is in the latter that the faith may be most deeply embedded in our national DNA. This brings us interestingly back to the debate about orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and perhaps challenges us to pay as much attention to lived reality as to theological argument.

There is one item of news from Council which is, alas, beyond questioning! After seven years as our Administrator, Christine Alker has decided she must retire at the end of this year. She will be a hard act to follow – but we know Modern Church is full of talent. Details of the job will be advertised in July both in this newsletter and more widely. ■

## Are we asking the right questions?

Merryn Hellier

As I read the Autumn newsletter of Modern Church, I found it harder and harder to discover what was 'new' or 'modern' in it. It came just as I had finished re-reading *Voices from the Margin* edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah. These voices are all Christian theologians who have to deal with poverty, oppression and severe hardship as a way of life. If life is lived in such conditions, the philosophical discussions of western theology are utterly irrelevant. Different theisms, spiritualities, exclusive / inclusiveness, eucharistic sacrifice etc. are of little matter. By way of illustration I will quote from Brazilian and Chinese theologians.

The Brazilian theologian, Carlos Mesters says,

**Without money or ability to read books *about* the Bible, the poor simply read it through their faith lived in community, and their lives of suffering as an oppressed people. Reading in this way, the poor discover within it the obvious truth which they did not know or which was hidden from them for centuries, namely:**

1. a history of oppression like their own today, with the same conflicts; and
2. a liberation struggle for the same values which they pursue here in Brazil today: land, justice, sharing, community, a decent life.

For them salvation means being liberated now from the forces that enslave them – not just a place in heaven, or as Soares-Prabhu from India put it:

**The anti-pride of Jesus is not self-abasement, but fearless and active service towards an alternative community of anti-greed. The poor bring their real life problems with them into the Bible, always bearing in their minds the situation of the community they want to serve. From this they discovered that ordinary people no longer need to depend on others to understand the Bible. They are not passive consumers but active producers of living liberation, saying that the Bible is no longer a strange book but 'our book'. We should be asking how the Bible can best help a person, not how can we make that person what our own understanding tells us God wants.**

Kwok Pui Lan, a theologian from Hong Kong, says:

**In the great century of missionary expansion, many acted as though they alone knew what the**

**Bible meant, believing that they were closer to the truth. The gospel was invariably interpreted as being the personal salvation of the soul from human sinfulness.**

This interpretation reflects an understanding of human nature and destiny steeped in western dualistic thinking. Other cultures, having a different thought form, may not share similar concerns. As T. T. Wu, notes,

**Such terms as original sin, atonement, salvation, the Trinity, the Godhead, the incarnation, may have rich meaning for those who understand their origins and implications, but they are just so much superstition and speculation for the average Chinese.**

This simplistic version of the gospel takes away from the struggle against material poverty and oppressions. But in the name of a 'universal gospel' this thin-sliced biblical understanding was pre-packaged and shipped all over the world. The American W. Hutchinson believed that

**Christianity as it existed in the west had a "right" not only to conquer the world, but to define realities for the peoples of the world.**

If other people can only define truth according to a western perspective, then Christianization really means Westernization!

The authority of the Bible cannot hide behind the unchallenged belief that it is the Word of God, nor an appeal to church tradition defined by white, male, clerical power, as marginalized people are asking if the Bible can help in the global struggle for liberation.

Tough words to swallow, yes, but they are given to us by deeply caring and experienced Christians. When we are so bound by scholars, books and tradition we don't see beyond ourselves, but they are worthy to be taken seriously because theirs is based so fully in the sort of life Jesus led. More than that, it leads us to think in a new way about the problems of a shrinking church. After 2000 years of trying, we have to admit that we are no nearer to fulfilling the Western picture of Jesus' mission. We're good at loving and worshipping God and developing our own spirituality, but we are seriously lacking in creating the 'good news for the poor' at the heart of Jesus' first recorded sermon in Nazareth, and echoed throughout his life. Is it time to start changing our questions? ■

## Evangelism and witness: about what?

Jonathan Clatworthy

Last month I attended Justin Welby's lecture on 'Evangelism and Witness' at Lambeth Palace.

Most of the attendees seemed to be church officers with some kind of evangelism brief. Ed Thornton of the *Church Times* was there, and over the preliminary canapés he introduced me to another journalist who sang the praises of Justin for at last addressing the declining numbers of churchgoers. I tried rather clumsily to relativise the significance of churchgoing numbers, referring to Linda Woodhead's research on what people actually believe, but it became clear that I was saying the wrong thing: the 'spiritual but not religious' generation aren't getting enough doctrine.

I was rescued by the announcement that the lecture was about to begin. Sure enough the Archbishop told us that evangelism and witness were **not** just about numbers of churchgoers. God's work does not begin with us. The death and resurrection of Jesus is God's work. What the Church is to do must not be determined by the institution; the institution must be determined by what the Church is to do. Too much activism shows a lack of confidence in God.

Nevertheless every Christian is required to witness. We were reminded of some texts by John Chrysostom, who thought Christians should feel compelled to want the salvation of others.

Ah yes, the cynic in me thought, the journalist was right. We need to be reassured that it is not just about numbers, because it is. Otherwise the Green Report would have been very different.

What else did Justin say? The Church exists for two purposes: to worship God in Jesus Christ and to make new disciples. Everything else is decoration. His three priorities are the renewal of prayer and the religious life; reconciliation; and evangelism and witness.

Evangelism is the good news of Jesus Christ coming into this dark world. Apart from Jesus there is only darkness. The point was illustrated with Caravaggio's painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. The best decision any person can make in their life is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. In answer to a question towards the end we were told that too often the Church preaches morality, not Christ. We should be saying 'Jesus is my lord'.



*The Calling of Saint Matthew, Caravaggio (1599-1600)*

I have three reservations. Firstly, answering one of the questions Justin sang the praises of the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, as one of the greatest diocesan bishops since the Reformation. This will surprise some London clergy.

Secondly, gender awareness hasn't penetrated Lambeth Palace. God was definitely He and Him. Nearly all the organisers and audience were male but the refreshments were served entirely by women.

The third is my dissatisfaction with the whole theme. I am not against evangelism, but I think it is best when it comes naturally as a part of conversation. I am therefore suspicious of projects and activities designed primarily for evangelistic purposes, and I think discourse about evangelism should always direct attention to what is being promoted, not to itself as an approved activity in its own right.

This is why much of the lecture reminded me of sermons I preached 30 years ago and now feel guilty about. It was clearest when Justin told us that the first of the Five Marks of Mission is to declare the good news of Jesus Christ. He explained that this lecture would not discuss the content of the good news. He could have added that nobody ever does. If you want to know what the good news of Jesus Christ actually is, you will have to read New Testament scholars, and they disagree with each other. Affirmations like 'Jesus is my Lord' or 'Jesus offers salvation' leave more questions than answers. ▶

Early Christianity challenged Greek and Roman paganism but got influenced by it. Two thousand years ago there were probably lots of devotees who would say things like ‘Apollo is my Lord’, ‘Herakles brought salvation’ and ‘Divine Augustus brings good news to the world’. Then as now, those who enjoyed the activities and rituals of their group would often have encouraged others to join. However they would have been clearer and more discriminating about who they wanted to attract and why; they lacked a sense of duty to convert whoever could be converted. When evangelistic Christians today echo their language, they are doing something that is not particularly Christian at all. This is why transnational corporations can so easily apply terms like ‘mission’ and ‘evangelism’ to their sales techniques.

The oddest thing about the lecture only occurred to me on my way home afterwards. The very same Justin Welby has recently taken a leading role in two brilliantly evangelistic achievements. One was the book *On Rock or Sand?* The other was the document *Who is my Neighbour?* Both were controversial, both generated opposition and both attracted comments like ‘If this is what Christianity is about I could believe in it’. Yet neither got mentioned, either in the lecture or in the subsequent questions and answers. It was as though everybody understood that the lecture wasn’t about that kind of thing.

### Why isn’t it? ■

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## The 2015 proposals to re-brand the Church of England

Ian Duffield

For many years Modern Church has campaigned for women bishops, espoused the cause of homosexuals, and resisted an Anglican Communion Covenant. A consequence of expending this effort - largely successful - is that attention has been distracted from other pressing issues. After all, you can’t tackle everything at once.

Whilst distracted, we’ve seen:

- a. **the increasing prioritisation of the ‘Fresh Expressions’ agenda over parochial ministry with the threat of Bishop’s Mission Orders;**
- b. **the end of freehold with bishops requiring clergy to set annual targets for mission;**

- c. **a concentration and consolidation of power in the Archbishops’ Council and the College of Bishops.**

And now there’s an episcopal push to re-brand the Church of England—as struggling businesses do. The Archbishop’s Presidential Address at February’s Synod tried to neutralise concern by describing the proposals as only a ‘means to an end’, but we know that inappropriate means are counter-productive; after all, to use a hammer when you need a screwdriver is to make matters worse.

Modern Church and members of congregations should be concerned about these proposals. Concerns relate to four aspects:

- **Presumptions;**
- **Process;**
- **Plans;**
- **Purpose.**

### Presumptions:

The recent flurry of reports is based on *anxiety*, i.e. if congregations continue to decline there is no future for the Church of England. In the General Synod debate, the First Church Estates Commissioner described it as ‘an existential crisis’, because ‘a doomsday machine’ is at work (*Church Times* 20 February 2015); I recently heard the Bishop of Exeter declare: if we don’t make new disciples, we will go ‘the way of Woolworths’. This presumption rests upon the mistaken notions that continued decline in attendance = demise and trends can be mathematically projected towards zero. Clearly, the Church is in a difficult situation, but not unique. Pubs are closing more quickly than churches, and political parties and other organisations have seen greater reductions in members.

The presumption underlining the reforms emphasizes numerical growth, as if it’s possible to counteract decades-long, mega social trends. Of course, things can be done to help arrest decline; but abandoning inherited ways and embracing short-term remedies is not wise. It is unsound to develop policy upon the basis of anxiety and upon a misreading of the situation and of what is possible. Wrong diagnosis leads to incorrect treatment. If there is a too pessimistic view of the Church of England’s future at work at the moment; there is, also, a too optimistic view of what the Church can do about it. These presumptions lead us astray. ▶

### Process:

The reports to reform the Church of England have been dominated in their commissioning and composition and implementation by the Archbishops' Council and the Bishops. Their publication at the same time is either bad management or a deliberate attempt to overwhelm the Church with a proposal tsunami. Even General Synod's involvement has been restricted (e.g. over the Green Report). In terms of process, this is regrettable.

Of course, these 'connected' proposals are presented as the solution to the Church's so-called 'crisis'. The apocalyptic message is clear: something *must* be done and it must be done *now*. This is not an Anglican way (compare the processes to revise the liturgy or consider the place of women in ordained ministry).

More worrying is that implementation of some proposals is taking place before discussion (for example, some recruits for the elite talent pool have been contacted). If a too pessimistic view of the Church's future drives change at too hectic a pace, then wrong decisions will be made and ordinary congregations and supporters in the wider community risk being alienated. An Anglican process has to be respectful of all opinions, giving time for proper consideration and scrutiny so as to take the whole Church forward together rather than proceeding with unseemly haste. Whether the motions taking forward some of the agendas (GS 1978, 1979, 1980) at the last Synod display sufficient caution and allow for sufficient scrutiny, time will tell.

### Plans:

Concerns about presumptions and process are only exacerbated by the plans, which demonstrate serious weaknesses. Let me illustrate:

- A veteran of previous reports regards the present batch as offering: 'old recipes for 'reformation' which have too often proved ineffective in the past'. Significantly, he notes that creative change normally comes from the fringe not the centre (Letter by Canon Anthony Harvey: *Church Times* 23 January 2015).
- If there are problems with our finances, why is the family silver (£2 million) being spent on training elite clergy at the expense of future generations? How will ordinary folk in the

pews view such expenditure, especially if they are being 'denied' their own vicar?

- If we need to spend money, is this a sensible way to do it? Especially if experienced practitioners in the field suggest otherwise: 'it is a recipe for wasting large amounts of money, [and] taking the Church backwards' (Letter by former Professor of Organisational Behaviour, David Sims: *Church Times* 19/26 December 2014)
- The Green Report has been critiqued by one earmarked for the talent pool (Article by Dean Martyn Percy: *Church Times* 12 December 2014), by one invited to tender for bishop leadership training (Article by Canon Keith Lamdin: *Church Times* 19/26 December 2014), by a critic of the report's 'managerialism' (Article by Associate Seminary Dean, Revd Justin Lewis-Anthony: *Church Times* 19/26 December 2014). Even knowledgeable supporters think the report too elitist, badly targeted, implemented insensitively, and lacking the 'wider and deeper conversation' required to make it acceptable (Letter by Keith Elford: *Church Times* 2 January 2015).
- The language of 'discipleship' in the reports reflects a sectarian, exclusionary, and non-Anglican kind of vocabulary that fails to engage with 'Anglicanism as a living tradition with norms and perspectives that are organic, rather than organisational.' (Article by Angela Tilby: *Church Times* 30 January 2015).
- The promise to reduce red tape seems welcome, but caution is required. By all means let's simplify, but let's not remove processes that provide checks and balances on the use of power. Who will ensure that this is so? Or will the impetus to do something new, to change things, over-rule common sense and inherited wisdom?
- There are *prima facie* grounds for concern about plans for church growth if reliant on the official report *From Anecdote to Evidence* (2014). This research was seriously flawed: its aims lacked academic rigour (they would have been unacceptable if presented by any research student), and its methods were inadequate. So, its conclusions are thereby ▶

undermined (see Letter by Revd Stephen Brian: *Church Times*, 21 November 2014).

**Purpose:**

The reports' purpose is to reform the Church towards numerical growth—but at what price? Developments (for example in Carlisle Diocese) suggest that the parish system is being abandoned in all but name—but without proper discussion and debate. Annual targets for clergy as agents of diocesan strategies point to a more controlling, centralised Church. Linda Woodhead says: 'These reports abandon [our historical] heritage without even realising it' (*The Challenges that the New C of E Reports Duck*, *Church Times* 23 January 2015). This attempt at reform is in danger of making the Church of England into a very different, less Anglican, kind of church.

The Bishop of Sheffield, who chaired two of the reports, rightly hopes that there will be 'rigorous conversation' about these proposals. For that 'conversation' to be serious, sufficient time must be allowed for it to take place in the widest manner possible. For that conversation to be 'rigorous' there must be proper scrutiny, critique, criticism, and rebuttal. Is General Synod up to the task? Will any Bishop dare break ranks? Or will we discover *our* Church has been re-branded before we've had chance to take breath? ■

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**Uncertainty, faith and inter-faith dialogue: speaking about God in multi-faith contexts**

A comment on Guy Elsmore's series 'Speaking about God in a parish of many faiths'  
*Brenda Watson*

There appears to be much truth in all three approaches to other religions: exclusive, inclusive and pluralist. Christians should witness to the uniqueness of Jesus; they should acknowledge the validity of the way in which God communicates with people of other faiths; and they should celebrate the fact of the differences as people seek to worship God. Yet rightly Elsmore drew attention to criticisms of each. Moreover, if the three approaches need each other, how do they cohere?

It may appear easier to forget about intellectual problems and focus instead on praxis which Elsmore notes as common to all three approaches. He asks

whether any speaking of God is 'a luxury when there are questions of appalling poverty and injustice to be addressed'. He notes how in a vigil during the invasion of Gaza there was a 'shared sense that in our solidarity we were standing on holy ground'. Such experience is central to valid inter-faith development. But should it preclude theological engagement?

We do have to love God with all our mind as well as with all our strength and heart. We should not give the impression that belief doesn't matter, for this would imply contempt for our cognitive powers. Moreover, it ignores a major reason for terrible abuse of religion. The menace of Islamic fundamentalism and violence, for example, is under-girded by a religious faith that has become tied, hand and foot, to an implacable certainty of creed handed down by scriptural authority as well as by revered leaders.

It might seem that playing down the significance of belief would challenge a mistaken mind-set most effectively. Elsmore quotes Paul Knitter's view that truth should not and cannot be seen as propositional, definite and eternal, and his conviction that religious language is more like 'love language'. I cannot quite agree because this could give the impression that whether what it signifies is true or not is unimportant. It can appear uncomfortably close to Nietzsche's nihilistic comment: 'there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.' (*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* trans. R.J. Hollingdale, CUP 1986 p.12f). In fact I think there is confusion at work here. Philosophers make the distinction between epistemology and ontology, between the claim to know and what is there to be known. The uncertainty regarding knowledge, to which Nietzsche drew attention, refers to epistemology, not ontology. The proper inference from this is that our claims to know must be acknowledged as partial and provisional, but not the reality thus claimed to be known.

Wouldn't the most fruitful route to challenging dubious certainty and possibly mistaken beliefs lie in strongly focusing on the role of uncertainty regarding belief - a major theme recurring throughout Vol.55 of *Modern Believing?* Our enormous intellectual, emotional and moral limitations mean that to presume that we can have absolute certainty about anything is questionable. Do we not need to renounce the extraordinary desire we all seem to have for absolute certainty? In many areas of life we just accept uncertainty and this doesn't prevent us from getting on with our lives - even finding the ▶



Are the Creeds believable? Some statements cannot be understood, some are unbelievable. 'I believe in...' implies some sort of verification. There is the problem of the existence of suffering, contrasting with 'Almighty'; and 'love' implies weakness and/or vulnerability. 'Only Son'/'only begotten Son' contradicts 'sons of God' in Job, and '...son of Adam, son of God' in Luke's genealogy of Jesus. How can the 'begotten' be of the same nature as the 'unbegotten'?

The experience of 'sonship' can be very negative for some people. 'Going into hell'; where is this? Likewise 'rising again into heaven to sit at God's right hand'. What does 'substance' mean in the Nicene Creed? What is the meaning of a 'Baptism for the remission of sins' and 'Looking for the resurrection of the dead'? The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) was set up to mop up and clarify certain misunderstandings and wrong ideas about the status of Jesus.

Everyone had the opportunity to ask questions, to speak and to join in discussion, some of which fitted in to David Jennings' presentation. Some were happy to join in saying the Creeds as metaphor and poetry, in solidarity with our current fellow worshippers, as well with our Christian predecessors, without taking them too seriously. Two of us took the Creeds literally and seriously, as Divine revelation given to the Church

Some of us were very uncomfortable with the place of the historic Creeds as part of our worship. We do believe in an ineffable God, with whom we have a relationship/fellowship/communion in prayer, allowing God to think in us. We can accept poetry in hymns and prayers, but our historic Creeds seem more literally binding.

I was the only one who took the opportunity to construct a 'believable Creed' (see Creed 1 below) while the others carried on discussing the issues. Someone who had to leave at lunchtime, submitted a 'Creed' (see Creed 2 below) after the event.

**Creed 1:** *(We have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.)*

**We believe in a loving, creating, forgiving, enabling and sustaining God beyond our understanding, God who has made us for loving fellowship with each other and with him. The resurrection of the dead is a necessary corollary of God's love. We believe that we are the more fully human, the more fully ourselves, the more fully we share in God's loving, creative and**

**forgiving activity, and that we are called to do this. We believe that God is always fully offering himself to us, and that we will the more fully receive his help and guidance the more fully we open ourselves to him.**

**Creed 2:** (Lesley Allen)

**God is God,  
Source and Creator of all that is,  
Lover and Sustainer.  
God in Jesus taught us how to live.  
Jesus gave of himself completely  
and so gained life in God.  
He gave us hope of forgiveness and new life.  
God works through us so that we become the  
people we were meant to be.**

Clearly there was no possibility of discussing Creed 2. The Creed 1 text above includes some suggestions put forward during a brief discussion. In an interfaith context, I might find it acceptable to include Mohammed and/or other teachers in this opening sentence. Most would have preferred to reference a sanctifying or atoning effect of Jesus' life and death on the cross, but I would not find that believable. ■

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## Indwelling

*Tim Belben*

The spiritual literature is full of suggestions that we should invite Christ to 'dwell in our hearts' and similar passages, but what do we actually think it means? Does the one who has so invited Christ *feel* that Christ is accompanying them? If not, why not? And what do we do about it?

My first suggestion is that this indwelling is not, in any circumstance, to be treated as a figure of speech: If Christ's presence is to mean something, it must be practical. Christ is - in metaphysical language - pure Act, pure existence. If one invites his presence, it is real, not potential, hypothetical or metaphorical.

Consequentially, one has to cherish an awareness of his indwelling, and cultivate a recognition, a welcome, and, above all, a realisation. It does not do to dismiss the invitation as fanciful or imaginary. Is that what you mean, too easily - when you sing *Abide with me*?

It does not do to think that nothing will happen, that no further response is required. If you ask, he will come - you must welcome his presence, even hug it ▶

to you - conversationally, if that is your style - say 'Hi there! Welcome!' Know, of course, that you must respect his presence (or her presence) personally. For any guest, you would clean the room, remove the lumber - do you not have to do this with your mind, or your soul, if Christ is to dwell there? Are there not now places in your mind that you would not visit, if Christ is at your side? We each have our own private places; so let them be 'swept and garnished'.

The theologian Torrance sometimes implied that the Holy Trinity's presence was a matter of the Son welcoming the Father's indwelling, to the extent that the Trinity was present, and active, whenever the Son's presence was invoked. That approach lends a qualitative difference to the so-called 'Jesus prayer', so that 'O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy'... becomes an invocation of the Trinity. Indeed - would anyone wish to *exclude* the Holy Trinity when praying the 'Jesus Prayer'?

I heard a diocesan spirituality adviser say 'The Jesus prayer' is too long' - implying, I think, that it is cumbersome to use in repetition, as a mantra. It may be, if taken as a phrase. But if taken word by word - 'O' for worship, 'Lord' for obedience, 'Jesus' for healing, 'Christ' for the Kingdom, and so on, the prayer becomes manageable - an invitation for 'indwelling' and all that presence implies. Take care, though - if you ask, he will come: so give thought to the consequences, and to whom else you want to extend the invitation...and where do you stop? ■

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## Book reviews

***What we talk about when we talk about God:  
Finding a new faith for the 21st Century***  
Rob Bell, Collins 2013

***Love wins: At the heart of life's big questions***  
Rob Bell, Collins, 2011  
*Alan Wolfe*

Rob Bell is a pastor living in Los Angeles, who has written several best-sellers and is apparently often heard and seen on radio and TV. When I started reading his latest book (*What we talk about*) I thought it was rather too light-weight for thoughtful and experienced Christians: it is written in conversational rather than literary language with lots of anecdotes

and jokes, and the lengthy second chapter describes the latest developments in modern science in a way anyone can understand.

But this turned out to be deceptive: the real subject of the book is some of the deepest problems of theology - who, what and where is God, what has he got to do with us, how should we relate to him? The clever point is that while the book raises the issues and the directions to which they point, it does not give any definite answers. We have to do that for ourselves, and once we have read the book we cannot duck the hard issues as we tend to in real life, nor can we accept unchallenged the conclusions of past eras which have been demonstrated as false by science's recent discoveries about God's creation.

The author accepts that we will not all come out with the same answers, and that in any case no answer can be completely 'right' in a world of uncertainty. But if we have genuinely thought about these issues in depth, and perhaps studied and discussed them, we should expect to receive at least a little insight from the Holy Spirit, and then be able gradually to improve our relationship with the God we worship.

The earlier book (*Love wins*) using the same chatty and jokey style, takes a similar approach to some almost equally fundamental questions: the meaning of Heaven, Hell and Salvation. Namely what does the Bible - especially the New Testament - say on the subject, what would this have meant to its original readers and what does it mean to us today?

However, unlike the later book it does seem to try to guide the reader's view. For example, it defines the one-and-only God as God of love, justice and mercy, who cares for everyone and everything He has created. Therefore we cannot possibly believe that He punishes by torture for eternity sins which, however serious, lasted for less than a century, which is only a dot on the history of humankind. This (it seems to me) puts paid to the traditional mediaeval concept of hell made famous in Dante's *Inferno*.

Further, could such a God run His creation as an enormous 'postcode lottery' whereby the majority of those born in Europe and North America will eventually become Christians and go to heaven; while the vast majority of those born in Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist countries, however dutifully they follow the precepts of their religion, will be destined for hell? ▶

So the sting in the tail of the second book for us to brood over is that given an all-creating, all-knowing and all-loving God:

- can we be 'saved' only by acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago?
- are we given only one chance to obtain salvation, namely when we come to Earth for such a short time and are provided with such varied internal talents and external opportunities?

Certainly we Christians should constantly try to keep Jesus' two Commandments, but should we not leave the judgement of others to God Himself? ■

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## In memory of Marcus Borg

David Storey



Marcus Borg at St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity in 2005

Marcus Borg has been for me a lifeline in my religious pilgrimage. I came late to him, thanks to the Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield, to which I travelled from the south coast with my wife in order to hear him. Another year we heard him in London. I also obtained tapes of him speaking at Edinburgh in order to play them in my car whilst travelling.

I was not afraid to mention him to my bishop as a theological scholar who brought a fresh perspective and understanding of the gospel. You might say that he walked humbly with his God. As a theological professor he was known to say to students who said that they did not believe in God, the God that they did

not believe in was also a God that he did not believe in. I regularly commend his book *The Heart of Christianity* as a foundational theological book. From there you can go on to read many of his other longer books which spell out the Jesus Christ and God that he did believe in.

*Jesus* (2011 SPCK), subtitled 'Uncovering the life, teachings, and relevance of a religious revolutionary' is remarkable in that he started to revise a book written twenty years earlier. Two years later it became a 'replacement' book: the first *Jesus: A New Vision* had been written when one might think he was a mature scholar of fifty, but he was ever maturing.

He had been a member of the Jesus Seminar and I view him as one of its best. He was a passionate believer in the reality and importance of the Gospel of God and Jesus for us today. But he knew that it needed representing with today's insights. I value his *Speaking Christian*, which is very useful in clarifying where Christian words have become misleading for too many people. I hope it will help Christians mean what they say and say what they mean. With John Dominic Crossan he provided study books on the birth and death of Jesus: *The First Christmas* and *The Last Week*. The two major festivals in the year deserve to be properly understood. These books should help.

Marcus obviously had an ability to reach out to other scholars, particularly shown in his relationship to Tom Wright which resulted in the joint book *The Meaning of Jesus*. Sadly I did not feel convinced by Tom Wright, though I found Marcus good at answering the challenges presented by Tom. Scholars of other persuasions have come on record as appreciating Marcus's ability to listen and respond constructively. He will be sorely missed. Do make use of his books and recordings. You should be well rewarded.

**Marcus Borg was born 11<sup>th</sup> March 1942 and died 21<sup>st</sup> January 2015 in Portland Oregon, where he was Canon Theologian at the Episcopal Cathedral.** ■

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## Administrator for Modern Church

Rosalind Lund

This is just to emphasise the point at the end of the Editorial that we will be looking for a new administrator towards the end of this year now that Christine Alker has given advance notice that she ▶

will retire in the New Year. A full job description will appear in the July edition of *Signs of the Times*, but in the meantime do think about whether you might know of someone interested in taking on this role.



We are tremendously grateful to Christine for all that she has done since taking on the role of Administrator - she will be greatly missed! ■

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## Modern Believing publisher wins prestigious award

Kieran Bohan



Liverpool University Press, publishers of Modern Church's quarterly journal Modern Believing, has been named IPG Academic and Professional Publisher of the Year 2015.

Following in the footsteps of much larger publishers, such as Sage and Bloomsbury, Liverpool University Press (LUP) is the first university press to win the award.

Anthony Cond, Director of LUP, said in an email to Modern Church:

**A good publisher sinks or swims based on the quality of its publishing, and so it is without exaggeration that I say that this award is yours too. The expertise and intellectual rigour of our journal editors and editorial boards have played no small part in LUP's success. Thank you.**

In the award citation, the IPG judges said:

**There's a lot of dynamism and innovation around Liverpool University Press.**

Professor Jonathan Bate CBE FBA, Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, and Vice-President of the British Academy, said:

**The revival of Liverpool University Press is one of the great success stories in the difficult climate of modern academic publishing.**

LUP is the UK's third oldest university press, with a distinguished history of publishing exceptional research since 1899, including the work of Nobel prize winners. LUP has rapidly expanded in recent years and now publishes approximately 70 books a year and 25 journals, specialising in literature, modern languages, history and visual culture.

LUP's mission is to disseminate high quality scholarly research and to promote learning and culture through the publication of books and journals. The Press is a global ambassador for the University of Liverpool, despatching tens of thousands of copies of its publications worldwide each year, all bearing the imprimatur of an internationally-focused, research-led, Russell Group university. ■

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## 2015 Annual General Meeting of Modern Church, Tuesday 14 July 2015 at 2.15pm

All members of Modern Church are warmly invited to the AGM which will be held during the annual conference at High Leigh Conference Centre, Lord Street, Hoddesdon. You do not have to book in to the conference to attend the meeting.

This is the time when officers, trustees and a third of the council members are elected. It is also an opportunity to ask questions, contribute ideas and discuss the work of Modern Church.

The membership includes all those individuals who subscribe to Modern Believing. Further information about the meeting and elections should be in your April mailing. If you would like another copy of this information or if you have any queries about the AGM, please contact Christine Alker on 0845 345 1909 or email her at [office@modernchurch.org.uk](mailto:office@modernchurch.org.uk). ■

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**To contribute to the July issue of *Signs of the Times*, please send articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying graphics to editor Anthony Woollard by 8<sup>th</sup> June. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words. Contact details on page 1.**