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journal**

**July 2013 volume 319**

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the baptist ministers'  
**journal**

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useful contact details are listed inside the  
front and back covers

*(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)*

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## ***From the editor***

### *Service rendered*

This time there is a very short editorial, because there is so much excellent material supplied by readers to fill the pages of this bumper issue. I am delighted by the willingness and creativity of so many readers to share their ideas with others in the pursuit of excellence in ministry. Thank you!

I also want to extend an enormous thank you to John Houseago, who has just completed his final section of book reviews after many years of service to *bmj*. John has been a staunch member of the team, delivering reliably for each issue a selection of reviews for us to enjoy. John, you have been an editor's dream and I do thank you on behalf of all the readers.

Later this year our new review editor will be another John—John Goddard, and we thank him for graciously accepting the job. Along with Jim Binney, who carefully compiles OITY, we will have a great team.

You will notice some other changes in BMF—Jenny Few is now chair, while Ron Day has become treasurer. Thank you to both friends for this service and also to Ronnie Hall who has served as treasurer previously.

If your Regional Association lacks a representative for BMF then why not think of someone who could fill that space? Now that the national resourcing of Baptist work has been reduced there is even more that BMF can do for you in ministry.

Every blessing to you for a restful summer and fruitful autumn in ministry. In October we plan a special issue on ministry after the 'Futures' process which we hope will be useful to all ministers. *Desert island books* will also be back. SN

***If you would like to submit an article, or comment on one you  
have read, please contact the editor, Sally Nelson, on  
revsal96@aol.com***

# In search of the church meeting

by Malcolm Egner

It should have been a fairly straightforward matter, compared with the proposed £70 000 deficit budget that would be agreed without a murmur later in the church meeting. In fact the proposal, brought by the ministers and elders, regarding charitable status for the church, was not simple. After an explanation and summary of the elders' deliberations, time was given for questions and comments from members. The initial silence gradually gave way to increasingly heated debate. An amendment was proposed, and then a counter-amendment. Members became confused. The issue of whether it could be left in the hands of the elders was hotly contested. Some members were upset. Someone commented afterwards that it was as if 'all hell had broken loose'. Ministers and elders felt battered and bruised. One new member commented afterwards that if this is what church meetings were like, then she would not be coming to any more.

I have come across several people who will not attend church meetings because of such experiences in the past, and even ministers who feel physically sick before meetings. Surely this is not the way that church meetings should be?

This particular church meeting confirmed the reasons behind two processes that were already in motion. One related to changes that would affect the governance of our church. The other confirmed my decision to focus my Master's dissertation on Baptist church meetings from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

I was under the impression that the style of many of our church meetings today was influenced more by changes in the 19th century than the original vision of the early Baptists, and my research confirmed it was so.

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## **Whatever happened to the covenant community?**

I discovered that in the early 17th century, the Baptist vision of church was radical. It was a vision for a community bound to God and to each other by covenant, entered through believer's baptism. This covenant community had the authority to appoint its own ministers and elders, and to maintain church discipline, by 'binding and loosing' members. It was based, so they believed, on the principles and practice of the New Testament church. As I researched I realised that its key characteristics were the emphases on discipleship, relationships, and members using their gifts; and the church meeting was at the heart.

As time went by, church meetings increasingly included other 'business', so it is little surprise that this inclusion changed the way in which meetings were conducted. At the heart of my dissertation was some original research into church meetings in the 19th century. I surveyed seven Baptist churches in a variety of locations and situations. Church meetings became, over time, far more businesslike in their proceedings. Minutes, chairmanship and voting became commonplace; membership applications and reviews featured; annual meetings with reports from all the 'departments' reflected the growing complexities of church life, especially for those outward-looking churches. This change mirrored the rise of voluntary societies. More and more rules for the conduct of meetings emerged. A Baptist Union manual at the end of the 19th century likened the role of the pastor and deacons as 'the Cabinet is to the Government or a Chairman and Board of Directors to a Public Company'.

The problem with these developments was that they tended to make church meetings more adversarial, probably more confrontational, more impersonal, and more readily at the mercy of those who could manipulate formal gatherings. This trend was epitomised in a series of church meetings at Brown Street Chapel, Salisbury, in 1875, concerning the reappointment of the church committee. What followed was more dramatic than an episode of *Eastenders*! There were motions and counter-motions, demands for resignation of the pastor countered by calls for certain members to resign, dramatic and epic speeches, accusations and counter-accusations.

The emphasis on democratic methods to arrive at decisions meant that members came to feel that they had the right to 'have their say', and for some it did not matter what effect it had on others. Regardless of whether they had any knowledge of the subject matter, or any involvement, regardless of spiritual maturity or the state of their relationship with God or with other members: this was their democratic right; they were church members!

It is little wonder that in the 20th century, church meetings increasingly came under

fire, and were described as unspiritual, dead, lacking inspiration, frustrating, dull, irrelevant, acrimonious and boring. A sad indictment of what should be the highest expression of life in the covenant community!

Having explored the subject, I concluded that the church meeting we have inherited is not an appropriate expression of the covenant community. I now hope to explain why I have reached this conclusion.

### **Priesthood and ministry**

The priesthood of all believers is often used as justification for the democratic approach to church meetings. However, the idea that everyone has the right to have a say on everything, since everyone has equal access to God, is fundamentally flawed. It fails to recognise that God has given different gifts to different people. Nor does it recognise that God speaks in many different ways—through prophecy, through scripture *etc*—and that a democratic gathering of God’s people is not the only arena in which his voice can be heard. In such a gathering it is quite conceivable that the prophetic voice could be in a minority of one, as Old Testament accounts of God’s people rejecting the prophet’s message demonstrate. In the New Testament the emphasis shifts to the prophetic community, in particular weighing the prophetic word. I would contend that a democratic atmosphere is not the best environment for this, since the emphasis is on expressing your own opinion or vote rather than on listening.

The priesthood of all believers is complemented by every member ministry. Christians not only have the privilege of access to God, but also a corresponding responsibility to use their God-given gifts in ministry. There are implications for leaders and members.

First, leaders should be encouraged to use their gifts, and this means letting the leaders lead. The problem is that some people automatically equate leaders leading with autocratic leadership, and prefer to think in terms of servant leadership, interpreting ‘servant’ as one who follows every whim of the church members. In fact, in the church, a good servant leader is obedient to God and does what is best for the church. I believe that at the root of the issue is a lack of trust and mutual accountability, which are both essential to effective community life. Accountability should not mean having to refer every decision back to a church meeting, nor should it mean the minister always watching over her shoulder in case what she has done displeases a member or a deacon. It is vital to find a way of exercising effective accountability built on trust. Crucial to this is the need to define boundaries for the leader’s work, and within them to give a leader free reign to work toward a vision.



Secondly, members need to be encouraged to use their gifts in effective ministry—making membership more meaningful. As opposed to turning up at a meeting and influencing matters in which you have little or no experience or involvement, it means being able to influence, make decisions, and make a difference in an area of ministry through personal involvement and commitment. This model is particularly relevant in a society where belonging, as opposed to institutional membership, is so important.

### **Discipleship and relationships**

I also discovered that discipline disappeared from the agenda of church meetings during the course of the 19th century. Large church meetings may not be the best place to go into the detail of moral failings, whereas early Baptist churches were relatively small. However, church discipline is important. It recognises that holy living and maintaining purity in the community makes it far easier to discern the will of God.

Nowadays we tend to see the term ‘discipline’ in a negative light. It would be better to see it more positively in terms of discipleship—for which a democratic church meeting is not the best place! The atmosphere that can develop is often not conducive to spiritual growth. It is vital for the wellbeing of the church that discipline, that is to say discipleship, is returned to centre stage. Mutual accountability is key, and may best be achieved in the forum of small groups.

Another key to covenant community life is relationship. Without meaningful relationships we are left with an institution, while with them we have community. A democratic church meeting is not very conducive to developing relationships. The potential for manipulation does not engender trust, and the formal procedure of addressing comments through the chair tends to depersonalise. Perhaps this problem was recognised when annual church meetings were preceded by fellowship tea.

I am not saying that a church whose governance relies on a democratic, procedural approach cannot take on board all these aspects. It is possible, but the odds are stacked against it. I am simply pointing out that such a style is not conducive to these vital aspects of the covenant community. There are more appropriate forms of governance that are more conducive to Baptist church life with an emphasis on discipleship and relationships, mission as well as community, and every-member ministry as well as the priesthood of all believers. There is no ‘one size fits all’, and there may be a number of solutions that will work in various circumstances. For example, I suggest that a consensus approach is very appropriate for a small church, but a large church would benefit from the emphases brought by the ‘ministry-led, accountable leadership’ model; both place importance on the involvement of members, albeit in different ways.

The consensus approach can create an atmosphere in which discipleship and discerning God's voice is easier. It lends itself to a focus on prayer, worship and learning. Communication within such a meeting requires and encourages honesty and vulnerability rather than the competitive need to win or to have our own way. We can learn much from the Quaker tradition with its emphasis on a strict and honest effort to find the truth.

### **Ministry-led, accountable leadership model**

John Kaiser's 'accountable leadership' model is based on the assumption that the church exists primarily for people on the outside of church but also for the people in the church. It is designed to counteract divisive politics, abuse by controllers, compromised vision, and a tendency for churches to leave ministry to the pastor and leadership to the members. In this approach, the minister's role is to bring vision and provide leadership; the congregation's role is ministry. The minister appoints 'staff', paid and unpaid, to manage each area of ministry, but it is the members, equipped and coordinated by the staff, who deliver that ministry. The minister is accountable to the elders or deacons who set boundaries and principles to provide freedom for the minister to lead. According to Kaiser, 'Accountable Leadership makes room for the congregation to have the final say on who is entrusted with leadership and whether to affirm their most far-reaching decisions. However, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the members being ministers rather than voters'. Control is replaced by trust. The pastor entrusts ministries to the members, rather than controlling ministries to see that they are done in a certain way. The members entrust leadership of the church to the pastor, rather than seeking to ensure the pastor does things their way

New Zealand Baptist churches have given Kaiser's model a strong Baptist emphasis with the church meeting agreeing to the 'boundaries'—*eg* doctrine, vision, leadership, finance, property. Elders or deacons uphold the boundaries and outcomes agreed by the whole church, developing, supporting and protecting the mission and vision, setting policy and providing spiritual oversight. The members, through the church meeting, have a role in appointing elders and the senior pastor, affirming the vision, approving the budget, and making major directional, staffing and property decisions. The pastor sets the vision and selects ministry leaders, including paid staff. Each year, the ministry leaders draw up a plan for their area of ministry, which is combined into a whole church plan by the pastor for presentation to the elders and then to the church meeting. The pastor coaches the ministry leaders and evaluates their progress throughout the year. At the end of the year, each ministry leader produces a written evaluation, which is reviewed by the elders before the planning process starts again. One observer comments:

When I saw what it really means for a congregation to have a ‘ministry-led church’ it was an encouragement to me, because I had assumed ‘ministry-led’ to almost equate with ‘autocratic leadership’. It doesn’t even come close to that. It gives a fresh understanding of ‘congregational responsibility’ as a Baptist principle—demonstrated by a greater understanding of permission-giving and wise accountability (Ian Brown, September 2000).

This model is a creative approach to some of the issues of contemporary church life, particularly for large churches. It gives greater emphasis to other Baptist principles, such as every member ministry, rather than to total democracy. The New Zealand model retains democratic procedures for key elements. Indeed, in theory it is still possible to see another ‘Brown Street episode’ take place, since members are involved in electing the minister and the equivalent of the church committee: but the change in culture that the model stimulates helps members to focus on their roles in ministry. The key is to change the focus from ‘having my say’ to a desire to fulfil the mission of the church by being ‘involved in the ministry of the church’.

Here at Rising Brook, Stafford, a comparatively large church, we have adapted this model. We voted not to vote (apart from where the law requires). We have put in place various methods to communicate with members, and to hear from them, both in our church gatherings and outside. Non-members are welcome to attend church gatherings, and this draws them into membership. Church meetings have been transformed, more than just in name. The church’s ministries, led by our members, have been released to make even more impact.

Our experience and my research have led me to conclude that if Baptist churches are to bring hope to society from their increasingly marginalised position, either by the quality of their communal life or by effective mission, it is time to reimagine the covenant community.

***Malcolm Egner is National Director of Dalit Freedom Network UK, and until recently a minister at Rising Brook, Stafford. The full dissertation, Re-imagining the covenant community: the church meeting and Baptist congregational life, can be downloaded from [www.egner.org.uk](http://www.egner.org.uk); Baptist Quarterly, October 2008 (42), includes much of the section on the 19th century in the article, Whatever happened to the covenant community? Baptist church meetings in the nineteenth century.***

***For further information about church governance at Rising Brook please contact senior minister and team leader, Martin Young, on [martin.young@risingbrook.org](mailto:martin.young@risingbrook.org) or call 01785 214750.***

# Collared for Lent

by Simon Woodman & Ruth Gouldbourne

Baptist ministers these days tend not to wear the clerical collar—perhaps it goes on for hospital visiting, or funerals, or sometimes on Sundays if the congregation likes it. But not during the week, surely? This short article tells the story of a ministry team which has been experimenting with reviving the collar.

There are five of us on the team at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, which is a busy church in the heart of the West End of London. It's about as 'city centre' as you can get. The building is open each day, and is frequently full of people who have come through the doors for all sorts of reasons—some for a sit down and a cup of coffee, some to ask for help, some to ask for money, some to attend to business, some to attend meetings, or rehearsals, or read-throughs, or whatever group has hired space from the church.

With so many people coming in and out it has become clear that, for many of the visitors to the church, the ministry team is fairly anonymous. The church manager is known because he deals with bookings, one of the other team members is very visible because he sorts out all sorts of technical stuff, but the rest of us could be anybody at all—just another visitor or hirer.

And so, during Lent, we decided to wear our clerical collars: in order, as one of us said, 'to be more present to the building'. We wondered if it would give us a way of being more visible, and of being able to talk to people without having to go through the awkwardness of explaining why we are talking to them!

## **Baptist practice**

The history of Baptists and the clerical collar has been far from 'uniform'! At the point where we started building churches that looked like churches and not like meeting houses, some also started wearing clerical collars as a way of indicating that they were 'ministers of the gospel' every bit as much as others who were more traditionally recognised as such. The collar became a way of saying 'we are, and can

be treated as, ministers in the traditional sense’.

Of the three of us who thought we would find wearing a collar useful, one of us has been in ministry for 25 years, and has worn a collar in ecumenical situations to avoid embarrassment; one of us has been in ministry for 14 years and has never worn a collar on any regular basis and never imagined doing so; and one of us is in training and has not yet been in a place where the issue has come up—until now. One of us is male. Two of us are extrovert (this is relevant).

And as we reflect on Lent 2013, how was it? The two extroverts have found that the collar has been useful: we have engaged in more conversations, people find it easier to approach us, they know who we are, and in our role as ‘chaplains to the building’—that is, to the wide variety of people who come in, some of whom don’t even know that this is still a church—contact has been easier, and identification has been useful. The introvert in our team has found that the collar does not switch off the invisible ‘don’t talk to me’ sign that hovers in the air—but has also not found it as uncomfortable as expected.

### **What does it say about us?**

We don’t wear our collars on Sundays—we don’t need to. They are not a statement about our role within the congregation. There, our roles are clear as those who care for the leading of worship, and oversee the life of the community through the call of the church meeting. When we wear them, it is to do with expressing who we are, on behalf of the congregation, to the wider community. They allow those who would have no reason to engage with us to have a reason; they allow us to start conversations with people who would otherwise wonder ‘why is this stranger talking to me?’. Even more, the collars give a context for talking about the life of the church, and by extension, issues of faith.

A previous member of this team used to wear a collar when he went to the gym. He discovered a whole series of people who wanted ‘a minister’ but had no idea how to find one. He developed a very effective pastoral and counselling ministry through it. It has been the same within our building. Wearing our collars doesn’t matter much to our congregation. They already know who we are and what we are ‘for’. Visitors, on the other hand, are put at ease, given a context and even offered permission to approach us.

Will we carry on? Probably—though possibly not every day. The introvert in our team finds that the loss of anonymity is not easy. The extroverts don’t want to get pigeonholed. At least one of the women finds that the restriction put on the clothes available is, surprisingly, profoundly uncomfortable. But it has proved its worth in terms of the contact made, and the possibilities offered.

And the most surprising result: an email from one of the Catholic priests who is part of the local clergy meeting. The community that is responsible for the church where he serves—also in the centre of the city—are having a similar discussion. He wrote to us:

*I was taken by your team decision to wear something identifiable when in the church environment. It's a matter that we have been asking ourselves about for some time here at Notre Dame de France. I will bring up the matter at our next community meeting, giving your decision as an example.*

We are waiting to see what they decide.

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### **Periodicals and books on Baptist history to give away?**

In November 2012, the Theological Seminary at Elstal inaugurated an Institute for Baptist Studies. Historian Dr Massimo Rubboli, Professor of American History at the University of Genova, delivered an inaugural lecture on Roger Williams. The new Institute will coordinate and carry out research in Baptist and Free Church history and theology, including a new critical and bilingual edition of Baptist Confessions of Faith. The first volume with 17th century confessions is being prepared in cooperation with Dr William H. Brackney of Acadia Divinity School, Nova Scotia.

The Seminary library and the Oncken-Archives at Elstal house the largest extant collection on German and continental Baptist sources and literature.

Unfortunately, there are major gaps in sources and literature on British Baptist history. Dr Martin Rothkegel, Lecturer in Church History at Elstal and Co-director of the Institute, would be grateful for donations of used books and periodicals on Baptist history, especially in Great Britain and North America. If you have any to give away, please contact him to check whether Elstal already has copies ([MRothkegel@baptisten.de](mailto:MRothkegel@baptisten.de)).

The Theological Seminary at Elstal (near Berlin) is operated and fully funded by the Union of Evangelical Free Churches (Baptists) in Germany, and prepares ministers for the Baptist Union and other Free Churches. At present, there are 66 students enrolled in BA and MA programmes.

# Changing culture, changing church

by David Huggett

Melvyn Bragg, in a TV programme celebrating the KJV's 400 years in 2011, reminded us of its influence in shaping our culture. We are of course grateful to God for the way Christian belief and ethics have shaped our society, leading with some justification to the description of it as a Christian country. But maybe we are not quite so comfortable with the idea that the opposite is also true—culture influences our religious (including our Christian) beliefs and practices—which may bring to mind the famous quip of Tommy Dewar, the whiskey magnate: 'minds are like parachutes: they only function when they are open'.

In this article I shall confine myself to reflection on the UK and use the term 'culture' in the sense Chambers gives it: the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action.

There are examples of cultural influence throughout the history of the church. 'Our Father who art in heaven', we pray. The idea of God's fatherhood was inherited from late Judaism and is influenced by that strongly male-dominated and paternalistic society. It seems likely, too, that the concept of God as 'up in heaven' also has its roots in the Jewish view of a three-tiered universe.

how  
comfortable are  
we with the idea  
that culture  
shapes Christian  
practice?

In 325 CE, the first Council of Nicea arose out of Constantine's need to establish the unity of the Roman Empire. He recognised the value of a united church and so insisted that the church came to one mind about the person of Christ, leading to a new relationship between state and church. As Marcus Borg notes (*The God we never knew*, p145), 'an [equally] good case can be made that the empire took over the church rather than the church taking over the empire'.

Later, as Philip Jenkins comments (*The new Christendom*, p7): 'A largely urban Mediterranean Christianity was profoundly changed by the move to northern forests. In art and popular thought, Jesus became a blond Aryan with the appropriate warrior

attitudes, and Western European notions of legality and feudalism reshaped Christian theology'. By the time of the Reformation, Christian thought had changed radically under the ideas of the Renaissance. The Dissenters' emphasis on the liberty of the individual may have encouraged the growth of democracy, but the influence was at least in part the other way round. Society was breaking away from feudalism. The power of the king and nobles was being curbed in the drive for greater political and personal freedom.

Victorian England saw the flowering of Britain as a major world power, but recent TV programmes by Jeremy Paxman paint a less than flattering picture of imperialism, which had its effect on the church. Twenty years ago, Brian Stanley of Spurgeon's College wrote *The Bible and the flag*, in which he noted that the evangelical missionary movement of that period was basically imperialistic. Christians sought to impose on heathen societies what they saw as Britain's model Christian culture. Although they did not use physical force, their imperialist spirit is echoed in some of the hymns of the period—*Soldiers of the cross arise*, and *March we forth in the strength of God with the banner of Christ unfurled*.

Imperialism is seen most clearly in India. By the middle of the 19th century there were increasingly strident calls for the conversion of all Muslims and Hindus. William Wilberforce was one who claimed, 'Theirs is a cruel religion. All practices of this religion have to be removed'. Such calls led to an influx of missionaries anxious to convert all Indians. Resentment grew, culminating in the Indian Mutiny (1857). News of atrocities reached Britain and were encapsulated in gruesome pictures such as *In memoriam* by Joseph Noel Paton. When displayed at the Royal Academy women fainted and it caused such outrage that Paton had to repaint it. Hysterical mass meetings followed and at one, attended by 25 000 people at Crystal Palace, C.H. Spurgeon called for a 'holy war' on the Indians.

### **The 60s 'hinge'**

With these examples in mind we can look at how our own culture has changed in the past 50 years, and how that may affect the church. Callum Brown of Dundee University suggests that during the so-called swinging 60s, 'something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organized Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance' (*The death of Christian Britain*, p1).

The 60s decade has also been described as a 'hinge' because of the way our culture changed direction. A variety of significant Acts were passed, leading to the liberalisation of obscenity in literature and on the stage, as well as relaxing restrictions on gambling



and drinking. The death sentence was first suspended and then abolished, homosexuality was decriminalised, contraception became available on the NHS and divorce was made easier. It was the era of the Beatles, 'second wave' feminism, student rebellion and anti-Vietnam protests. The assassination of the US President, John F. Kennedy, rocked the world. Britain lost its Empire, 32 African countries gained independence and the world was engulfed in the Cold War.

Many of the changes in Britain were made possible by growing affluence—Macmillan famously said we had 'never had it so good'. Prosperity permitted the rise of the 'youth culture' of the period. Teenagers were increasingly able to buy records, and attend dance halls and coffee bars, graduating to booze, scooters, and cars. Their increased independence led to diminishing parental influence, while plentiful jobs meant that respect for the boss declined too. At the same time the church youth club, so popular in the 50s, lost its attraction.

Affluence led many to buy their own homes, and spend their time and money on DIY and gardening. Owning a TV and a telephone encouraged staying at home, and was a factor in breaking down close-knit communities where previously the open front door and gossiping on the doorstep had been common. The pressure for acceptable behaviours, including church going, expected by such communities declined.

### **Church response**

The churches have responded to these changes in different ways. Although an oversimplification, it is convenient to describe the UK church as broadly liberal or conservative. During the early 1960s the liberal strand was strong and growing, especially among student groups like the SCM. After 1968 it declined, perhaps sidetracked into secular radical movements, or disillusioned by the cool support given by many churches to radical programmes.

Many conservatives responded by re-emphasising the authority of an inerrant Bible, and resisting the period's moral changes. Polarisation and distancing from wider society often followed. Other conservatives responded by adapting to youth culture, producing such hymn books as *Youth praise*, and music groups such as the Joy Strings. A major influence was the 'Jesus Movement' associated with Arthur Blessitt. A charismatic movement with its roots in the Californian Episcopalian church, it was formed in 1959 and reached the UK in 1963. Along with other charismatic groups, many were attracted by its uncompromising teaching, its openness to secular culture and its emphasis on emotions. David Bebbington comments (*Evangelicalism in modern Britain*, p244), 'The new movement, rejoicing in its spiritual freedom, broke with many a shibboleth. Harper rejected the rigidity of what he called "the evangelical code of behaviour"...Members of a house church scandalised the Christian

people of Aberdare by buying ice cream on Sunday, reading the Sunday newspaper and drinking wine at dinner...There was an extraordinarily unEvangelical delight in symbol—"a love of oil, candles, crosses *etc*". The result was considerable numerical growth, often at the expense of mainstream churches.

Although trying to anticipate what the future UK church may look like is risky, there are trends in society to which the church is responding, which may offer some hints.

For example, the past half century has seen the arrival of what Marshall McLuhan dubbed the 'global village'. Easy travel and a booming economy enabled refugees from political instability and economic migrants to make their home in the UK. We now live in a multicultural and multireligious society, which raises urgent questions about how the church will relate to those of other faiths with whose beliefs and behaviour we have more in common than with those of no faith in our secular society. Without compromising our faith, can we build friendly relationships with them? At least it should mean a careful and honest reassessment of our mission strategy. This is especially important for relationships between the two fastest growing religions in the world (Islam and Christianity), where relations in the past have been disastrous.

Furthermore we need to take account of the way the centre of gravity of the world church is shifting from the West to the South and East. In 1900 the African church numbered just 10 million. Today it is estimated to reach over a billion by the middle of the century. Although not so dramatic, figures for Latin America and Asia also show major increases. Not only do their cultures mean that they interpret Christianity differently, but they also tend to be more conservative in theology and ethics. Africans, for example are much readier to accept the supernatural, and see biblical themes on justice and suffering mirrored in their own harsh experiences. As the western church becomes a smaller part of global Christianity, its role and its relationship to the vibrant new churches of the South and East will inevitably change.

### **A new worldview**

Another feature of modern western society is its reliance on scientific rationalism. As Kathy Galloway, of the Iona Community, put it in the Times, most younger people 'operate within a different worldview'. Young people are growing up in a world of amazing discoveries. They take for granted evolution, DNA, quantum mechanics, particle physics, black holes and quarks. The universe is seen to be vast, and for many this seems to have pushed God much further away than the traditional view suggests.

In the past, Christians accommodated their beliefs to the discoveries of Copernicus, and for many years now, scholars have been re-interpreting theology in the light of modern

discoveries. Bonhoeffer with his religionless Christianity, John Robinson (*Honest to God*), and more recently Marcus Borg (*Meeting Jesus again for the first time*) come to mind. Writers like Keith Ward (*What the Bible really teaches*) and James Dunn (*Did the first Christians worship Jesus?*) are among those seeking to engage the thoughtful general reader. A number of support groups have emerged like the Progressive Christian Network and Free to Believe.

Some, while enjoying the fruits of modern science, may be uncomfortable with the idea of restating the Christian faith, but even the NT writers appear to have accepted the need for developing and even changing some beliefs. If, for example, the standard dating of the gospels is accepted, it seems clear that there are many points of change between the first and last to be written.

One further cultural change can be mentioned—the development of a more liberal society, brought about chiefly by the legal changes introduced during the 1960s already cited. These modifications grew out of growing demands for individual rights, personal freedom and less state interference. The resulting equality before the law between groups of differing beliefs have had the effect of removing the privileged status of the church.

In addition, with a large increase in well trained caring professionals, society has assumed responsibility for many of the social and charitable activities previously undertaken by the church. Since this may be part of an answer to our praying 'Thy kingdom come on earth ...!', we can't complain. But it means that many no longer turn to the church when in need, reducing the status of the institution and its clergy.

Three points are worth noting in conclusion:

- we cannot avoid the fact that societal change will continue to affect the church;
- while the church will need to change, care must be taken for its core beliefs;
- the church is in part a human institution, but more importantly it is a divine one, and 'the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Matthew 16:18).

***David Huggett, now retired, has been 55 years in ministry, most recently as the Association Secretary for the Western Baptist Association. This paper was originally given to the retired ministers of the Wessex District of the WBA. Contact David on davidhuggett74@btinternet.com.***

# Church alive in China!

by Paul Beasley-Murray

Millions of tourists make their way around the great sights of China—they visit X'ian to see the terracotta army; they take a cruise on the great Yangtse River and see the Three Gorges; and in Beijing they see the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and go for a drive to the Great Wall of China—yet they do not see the amazing things that God is doing in China today. The church is extraordinarily alive in China—against all expectations. I will briefly explore its history.<sup>1</sup>

Tradition says that the gospel first came to China around AD60. Thomas the Apostle went to India, and then to China—and then returned to India, where he died. So the story goes—but on the whole people did not believe the Thomas-in-China story until in 2008 two Frenchmen drew attention to some bas-reliefs in Kongwangshan, suggesting that Thomas went from India to China by sea because of unrest on the Old Silk Road through central Asia. Whatever the truth, the alleged visit of Thomas is of little relevance to the church in China today.

There have been two other 'false starts' for Christianity in China before its presence became permanent. The first was in AD638, when a group of 21 Nestorian monks from Persia built the first Christian church in China in Chang'an. There is a famous Nestorian monument which tells of the Chinese emperor welcoming these foreign missionaries. In the words of the edict of Emperor Taizong, the message of Bishop Aluoben (or Alopen) 'is mysterious and wonderful beyond our understanding. The message is lucid and clear; the teachings will benefit all; and they shall be practised through the land'. Sadly, by the beginning of the 10th century Christianity had died out.

The second 'false start' was in the 13th century, when Pope Innocent IV sent two different Franciscan-led diplomatic-religious missions to the Mongols. At one stage these missionaries had some success—there is a report of some 6000 baptisms taking place in 1305. But the missionary effort collapsed and by the end of the 14th century the church seems to have disappeared.

God is doing  
amazing  
things in  
China today

In the 16th century the Roman Catholics had more success. Around 1582-83 the Jesuits gained permission to settle in China—the most famous Jesuit being Matteo Ricci, who died in 1610.

The Protestants arrived in the 19th century. The great pioneer was Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society, who published the first systematic grammar of Chinese, a three volume Chinese-English dictionary, and the Bible in Chinese (the Morrison Bible is still in use). The Baptist Missionary Society were soon on the scene: as a young person I used to be taken to a Chinese restaurant by Mali Brown, the daughter of the great Baptist missionary to China, Dr Williamson, who produced the best-selling book, *Teach yourself Chinese*. There were also independents—Hudson Taylor, Mildred Cable and Francesca French, Gladys Aylward, and many others. China became the largest mission field in the world, and Christian schools, universities and hospitals were established.

### **The People's Republic**

It's a great story, which eventually appeared to end in failure. With the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the Marxist dogma that religion was socially retrograde and doomed to extinction, the churches found themselves out of favour. With the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950, when US and British troops joined the South Koreans against the North Koreans and the Chinese, things became worse. All the missionaries were thrown out; and Christians began to be persecuted.

The leaders of the Chinese church seemed to lack fight for the challenge, and it looked as if the Chinese church could not survive without foreign patronage. The number of churches was shrinking and pastors were ageing. Certainly as far as Protestants were concerned, in the early 1960s there was no sign that the Chinese church could survive. And although there were many more Roman Catholics than Protestants, even they were struggling. There seemed to be no way in which Christians could adapt to Chinese culture and develop a genuine Chinese church.

Then Chairman Mao started the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In 1966, at its beginning, there were about 800 000 Protestants and perhaps 3 million Roman Catholics. Then all religions were abolished, and all houses of worship were shut. The Red Guards hounded not just the intelligentsia but also Christians. Homes were ransacked, people were beaten, sent to prison and killed. The Cultural Revolution was not aimed primarily at Christianity—there was a wholesale transportation of the so-called 'bourgeois' into the countryside—but during this period some 30 million people are thought to have died and millions more lives were destroyed, including those of Christians.

Tertullian famously said, ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’—and this happened in China. Churches, which had gone underground, proved to be amazingly innovative—and not only survived, but flourished. At this point I confess I am confused by a bewildering disarray of statistics. According to my friend Terry Calkin, by the end of the Cultural Revolution (when Mao died), there were 20 million Protestants. Other sources give a more conservative figure of 5-6 million. The church had grown by at least a factor of five or six, and since then it has continued to grow.

Writing in 2007, the journalist Rob Gifford states: ‘Even conservative estimates put the total number of Christians at around 75 million (about 15 million Catholics and about 60 million Protestants). That is only about 6% of the population, but is still more than the 70 million members of the Chinese Communist Party’.<sup>2</sup> That was 2007, but when I recently went online for up-to-date statistics, figures of 120 million were being quoted—indeed, some have even claimed there are 180 million Christians in China. To quote Rob Gifford again: ‘The Party has now quietly accepted that it will not be able to get rid of religion. In fact, amazingly, Chinese officials will admit off the record that Chinese people need something to believe in’.<sup>3</sup>

### **Loss of hope**

What has brought about this sea-change? According to Terry Calkin, it has been the loss of hope. Hope was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution—but Christians were able to speak of their hope in Christ. Was this what happened? Certainly the Cultural Revolution, in getting rid of Confucianism, also destroyed the basic values of Chinese life. Confucianism is about bringing society into harmony with the cosmic order by adhering to certain ethical principles. These principles were to be exemplified in the behaviour of rulers and officials. Confucius said: ‘When a prince’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders but they will not be followed’. Today however, the Chinese government is corrupt—and so is everybody else.

Rob Gifford quotes a Shanghai radio star, Ye Sha, who runs a radio phone-in show called Shanghai State of Mind, which goes out from midnight to 1 am every night. She said to him: ‘People, especially young people...are lost’. She spoke of the loss of morality. There had been a time when there was an ethical framework. ‘Now what is right and what is wrong?’. She went on: ‘No-one knows how to be a person any more. We are training technicians. We are not training people’.<sup>4</sup>

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, religious belief and activities were largely

decriminalised. During the Christmas season in 1978, Protestant churches began to re-open, and Catholic churches soon after. Seminaries were re-established. These churches and seminaries were expected to ‘register’—but not all were prepared to do so. As a result, we now have the division between the registered churches and the so-called house churches.

The registered churches together form the Three Self Patriotic Movement. American right-wing evangelicals in particular have been very critical about the registered churches, suggesting that the true Christians are to be found in the house churches. But the reality is that registering a church with the state is not a sin—we do it in this country. A church, for instance, is usually a registered charity, and the building is ‘solemnised’ for weddings. Furthermore, as Baptists we should be in favour of the principles underlying the Three Self movement, which is about being self-governing, self-funding, and self-propagating. As for being patriotic, it is not a sin to love one’s country—indeed, surely as churches we should heed Jeremiah’s advice and seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29.7), and presumably too the welfare of the country.

### **House church movement**

The house churches are mixed—some are very Pentecostal, some not. Many are tightly organised and very authoritarian—indeed there is one group where the ‘great servant’ is able to inflict physical punishment such as lashes on the disobedient!<sup>5</sup> Many house churches are huge—in Beijing I met a couple who belonged to a 1000-strong house church, which met on a Sunday in groups of 200!

These house churches should not be described now as ‘underground’ churches—in today’s China nothing is ‘underground’, everything is known to the state. Indeed, the Beijing couple spoke of how their Sunday meetings were regularly visited by the police. My understanding is that increasingly there is cooperation between the registered and non-registered churches.

The Chinese church has been strongest in rural areas, but sometime between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, Christian growth slowed in the countryside and grew stronger in China’s cities. Initially the urban congregation was typically middle or lower-middle class; but over the past 20 years many well paid professionals have joined urban churches. However, it apparently remains true that the intellectual level of the registered churches in particular is quite low. Of the 18 Protestant seminaries, only one operates at university level, yet Chinese intellectuals are interesting themselves in

the Christian faith—so much so that there are now more than 20 university-based centres or institutes in China focused on the study of Christianity! Christian churches now experience a good deal of religious toleration, although they do not enjoy full freedom of religion. Evangelism among children and young people under 16 is not allowed.

In November 2012 I travelled to China at the invitation of Terry Calkin, the recently retired pastor of Green Lane Christian Centre, a mega-church in Auckland NZ, to teach in the seminary in Wuhan. Wuhan is an industrial city of some 10 million people on the river Yangtze, in the central Chinese province of Hubei. We went under the auspices of China Partner, a small German-American evangelical organisation, which seeks to train leaders in the registered churches.

Over recent years Wuhan Seminary has grown and now has over 300 students, many of whom are women. Almost all my class of 60 students were from non-Christian homes, and most came from churches with more than 500 members. Very few knew any English and so I was totally reliant on translators—fortunately the Principal of the Seminary, Rev Wang Zhenren, spoke English. I taught three short courses: the first on the four gospels; the second on Jesus' approach to the use of power; and the third on biblical patterns of leadership and their application to today's church. In talking to the Principal, it was clear that there is a real shortage of teachers with knowledge and experience.

## **Worship**

The highlight of my visit was an invitation to preach at the two main morning services at Wuhan's 2000 member Thanksgiving Church. I did not know what to expect but I was taken aback by the vibrancy of the prayers: at the end of every sentence, the congregation shouted 'Amen'. I was staggered by the passionate proclamation of the Apostles' Creed—it was almost as if against all the principalities and powers they shouted out: 'I believe in God, the Father almighty...I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...I believe in the Holy Spirit'. Never before had I heard Christian belief so strongly affirmed. The Lord's Prayer too was no mere recitation: people meant what they said.

Interestingly there was nothing special about the sung worship—the leader, with a foreign guest in mind, had chosen the Chinese versions of *Now thank we all our God*, *What a friend we have in Jesus*, and *Count your blessings*. My role was to preach the sermon, which was on the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15. I had thought I had done a pretty good job, providing a really fresh way into a well known story, but as (with an interpreter) I began to preach it in Wuhan, I was less certain and began to think I had been too clever. As I came toward the end I said: 'The Good News is that God loves you passionately—indeed, the more outside the Kingdom you are, the more he loves you.



And what's more, when we do repent, when we do turn back to God, there is always forgiveness. So turn back to God—come home and discover his love for you'. The worship leader took up the appeal and with great passion invited people to come forward to receive Christ—and to my amazement, come forward they did. In the first service two, and then in the second service 19, people came forward in response. They were invited to raise their hand in a sign of allegiance to Christ as the words on their 'decision card' were read out—and then they were led off to begin a series of three months' baptismal preparation.

Bibles were everywhere. I saw them on sale in two church bookshops in Wuhan; and at church I saw many people with Bibles of their own. While I was there *China Daily*, the government English-language newspaper, had a prominent article highlighting the fact that China is the world's biggest publisher of Bibles. Also while I was there, Amity Printing Company in Nanjing was celebrating its 100-millionth Bible.

There are still problems—for example, in some of the rural areas of China around 60% of the Christian population is illiterate (most are women). As a result, Bible Society here in the UK is backing an initiative by the Chinese Provincial Christian Councils to raise the literacy level of such Christians. The goal is to have at least 30 000 people in rural areas of China benefiting from the programme each year and receiving a Bible at the end to read for themselves.

In conclusion, the church is well and truly alive in China, and this gives me hope—not least for our own country. The churches of the UK are for the most part in poor condition—humanly speaking, for many of them there is little hope of survival. Our country has lost its moral bearings—as in China, people no longer seem able to differentiate between right and wrong. The lesson of China is hope—hope that God can revive and transform his church, hope that God can work in the lives of many millions who at the moment seem to be beyond our reach. Our God is an amazing God!

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#### **Notes to text**

1. My main source is Daniel H. Bays, *A new history of Christianity in China*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
2. Rob Gifford, *China road: one man's journey into the heart of modern China*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, p139.
3. Gifford, p139.
4. Gifford, pp22,23.

# Science as apologetics

by Peter Colyer

In this paper I will examine three areas of science which offer defences for the Christian belief in God. I am not proposing ‘proofs’ of God or of Christianity, and in each example I will point out some weaknesses in my case. My aim is to show that in these three areas modern science is pointing in a direction at least consistent with Christian belief.

This aim is important for all of us, for several reasons.

*1. Our belief in creation.* Since we believe that God is the creator of the universe, the universe must be consistent with God’s being, begging the question of what exactly God’s creative activity means. Are we talking about creation in the beginning, or continuous creation? In what ways do we discern or explain the actions of God now? For present purposes I will assume that we accept, in some sense, that God is the creator of the physical universe. I will come back later to one point at which this assumption may need to be modified.

*2. Atheism and science.* This subject is also important because much of the present atheistic attack on religion in general and Christianity in particular is driven by scientists and is presented as a conclusion of scientific principles. The impression is given, and given deliberately, that atheism is a scientific finding based on scientific knowledge. Every individual is of course entitled to express his or her own views, but those who claim that the sciences can pronounce on the existence or otherwise of God should not go unchallenged. There is an irony here: if God is the creator of the natural order, which science is gradually revealing, it should be impossible for science to draw atheistic conclusions!

*3. It is common knowledge.* We should not imagine that science is an obscure subject about which most people know little and care less. Science and technology affect the lives of everyone, and the impression that science and religion are antagonistic is common knowledge. It is found in television programmes and newspapers and is being absorbed by adult church members and by teenagers at school. A recent reviewer has written that scientism, the belief that science is the only way to the truth, is ‘the orthodoxy by which we live’.<sup>1</sup>

Christians need to address these issues and so I will now discuss the three areas of science which may contribute to a modern Christian apologetics.

### **The Big Bang as a moment of creation?**

Since the 1920s the sciences of astronomy and cosmology have been pointing towards the origin of the universe in a single massive explosion of energy. From the 1950s onwards this has increasingly become the accepted explanation, more recently supplemented by experiments in high energy accelerators. Mathematics and physics have combined to produce a detailed timescale of events from the first fraction of a second about 13.7 billion years ago. The formation of all the chemical elements is also explained through the life history of at least two generations of stars.

This scientific story has attractions for Christians, since it appears consistent with the biblical picture of a moment of creation. It should be noted that the scientific explanations do not—and, on the basis of present knowledge, cannot—take us back to the absolute beginning. The theory cannot reach further back than  $10^{-43}$  seconds after the Big Bang, an unimaginably short interval, but nevertheless not the absolute beginning. Opinions differ as to what might have happened before  $10^{-43}$  seconds, though even the meaning of ‘before’ is itself problematical at a point when time itself was coming into existence.

There is room here for initial divine creativity, but we should be cautious in claiming that the Big Bang is the moment of creation. It is always dangerous to invoke the action of God when other explanations fail—if scientific explanations are discovered at a later time, reliance upon a divine cause looks foolish. Some scientists propose an initial spontaneous creation in a ‘quantum vacuum’, though exactly how such a creation would happen or why a quantum vacuum should exist have not been adequately explained. This, or some other scientific explanation, may lie in the future.

Alternatively, the principle of the conservation of mass and energy suggests that the Big Bang must have had some physical antecedent (unless the principle of conservation was itself initiated at the beginning, as part of a genuine *creatio ex nihilo*). Such a physical antecedent might have been a ‘Big Crunch’ in which all the matter and energy of a previous universe came together in an enormous implosion, to be then ejected in the Big Bang. Such cycles of universes could have occurred innumerable times, though there may be no way in which such a speculation could be verified when no data can survive the conditions of the Big Bang itself.

The physical conditions prevailing at the time of the Big Bang would appear to be remarkably constrained to favour the continuation of the universe and the eventual

emergence of life. If the conditions had been very slightly different, the emergent universe might never have survived, or might have fizzled out into an amorphous spread of unconnected particles. As a result some people have suggested that the initial conditions were 'fine-tuned' for the emergence of stability and, eventually, of life. The variations that would have caused the universe's early demise are in some cases so minute that a conclusion of intentionality by a supernatural designer appears highly plausible.<sup>2</sup> A recent writer has concluded that 'modern physics is definitely faith friendly'.<sup>3</sup>

However, caution is needed. First, we do not know whether these physical constants may be related to each other—perhaps there are physical reasons, as yet unknown, for their values. Maybe an evolutionary process analogous to natural selection produced the set of values that produced the universe. Second, we do not know what this universe might have been like if some of the values had been different. And third, in the billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars there may be forms of life very different from our own, which may be better (or worse) adapted to the physical conditions that prevail. All these factors suggest that we need humility in drawing bold conclusions from the Big Bang and 'fine-tuning' as possibilities for Christian apologetics.

Some philosophers of science have avoided the conclusion that a divine designer must be the cause of the fine-tuned universe by postulating the existence of many universes—this universe just happens to be the one (or possibly one of many) with the physical conditions that permitted the emergence of life (though the reason for the existence of many universes is as obscure as the reason for the existence of one).

### **Evolution and the problem of evil**

Evolution by natural selection has been criticised from a religious perspective because of its assertion that all living species are interrelated rather than distinct creations, and because of the apparent lack of purpose and direction in a process that incorporates extinctions and a degree of randomness. But evolution, when carefully considered and properly understood, turns out to have some theological advantage in relation to the ancient problem of natural evil.

Biological evolution, as currently accepted by most scientists, states that minor variations in DNA during the reproductive process lead to variations between offspring (as we all know from observing the differences between children of the same parents). Those offspring whose characteristics are better adapted to the prevailing environment,

even in small ways, will have better chances of survival and therefore of passing those characteristics to their own offspring. In this way the characteristics of the species will change in sympathy with the pressures of the environment. The process is particularly rapid in those parts of the plant, insect and animal kingdoms whose rates of reproduction are enormously greater than, for example, is the case with humans. The natural conditions of the environment act as the filter determining the characteristics of future generations. If a sub-group becomes isolated from the parent group of the same species, the changes may eventually become sufficient to prevent interbreeding—thus a new species has appeared.

This process of change by natural selection suggests that freedom is a fundamental feature of the natural world. DNA may have evolved in an uncontrolled, undetermined manner, but those changes that produce advantage in the prevailing environment will succeed. So the emergence of killer diseases, or of animals preying upon each other, even in some cases upon their own species, may be seen as an inevitable consequence in a world that has been given the opportunity to develop freely. God is not responsible for the results of the freedom that he has given to the world.

There is an analogy between this freedom of nature and the freedom of humans. We do not blame God for the horrors of the Holocaust or acts of aggression or terrorism. Neither should we blame God for those aspects of the natural world, which appear nasty to our moral sensibility, but which have come about through evolutionary advantage.

This argument acts as a partial constraint on my initial argument that belief in God's creation means that the natural world should be pointing towards God, not denying him. I am now suggesting that some features of the natural world should not be regarded as part of divine creation, but as the results of evolution. I recognise there is a difficulty here. On this basis, not everything in the natural world can be labelled 'creation'. The meaning of divine creation in an evolving world is a subject that merits deeper consideration than the bland affirmations usually given.

### **Indeterminacy, decay and miracles**

This argument is the weakest of my three apologetic applications of science. If you have not been persuaded by my arguments arising from the previous two, you are unlikely to be convinced by arguments from quantum indeterminacy and radioactive decay!

According to the quantum understanding of the nature of matter, all atoms consist of electrons in orbit around a nucleus, itself composed of protons and neutrons. The

electrons may circulate in one of several orbits, and may jump, apparently spontaneously, between orbits. Identical atoms will behave in different ways. Although there are some constraints, electrons appear to have a degree of freedom.

Radioactive decay is another example of the changing nature of what was once thought of as permanent. Here, the changes occur in the number of neutrons in the nucleus, and the result is a change from one element into another. These changes, like those observed in quantum mechanics, are not pre-determined but are probabilistic—the stability we perceive in the natural world is based upon the averaging out of large numbers of events, but there remains a statistical probability of extreme events occurring.

The discovery of the atomic world at the very small scale of existence has made us much less certain about the permanence of materials. Our world depends on material stability—we trust that the steel in our cars will retain its rigid strength and that the bricks in our homes will not turn to liquid. But even so, at the atomic level it is becoming increasingly difficult to define exactly what the world is made of.

It is a long way from radioactive decay and quantum indeterminacy to miracles of, for example, healing, in which the nature of diseased tissue is restored to its healthy condition, not to mention the conversion of water into wine. Suffice to say that scientific discovery has rendered the world a more uncertain place than it used to be. Science and faith, as forms of intellectual activity, are more similar than most people suspect.

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#### **Notes to text**

1. Bryan Appleyard, Review in *New Statesman*, 18 October 2010.
2. Physical constants apparently independent of each other but essential for the stable existence of the universe include: the balance between the forces of expansion and attraction; the balance between matter and antimatter; the difference in mass of the proton and the neutron, the charge balance between the proton and the electron, and the ratio of protons to photons; the temperature immediately following the Big Bang; the proportion of hydrogen in the form of deuterium; the value of the universal gravitation constant G; and the resonance level of carbon. Others could be added. For our present purposes it is necessary only to note that the early universe was very finely balanced between existence and non-existence.
3. Ian Markham, *Against atheism*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p 78.

# Points of view

## *The new monasticism* by Mike Smith

Recently the flavour of the month was things 'Celtick'. Now we are encouraged to embrace 'the new monasticism' and learn from the eastern tradition. Unfortunately, a little learning can be a dangerous thing!

Much is made of the desert fathers and their contribution to spirituality. However, it must be said that many of the desert hermits were psychologically unbalanced and today would have been on psychiatric wards. Isolation in deserts with little food did not necessarily produce good theology. The Lausiac history of Palladius is written about them by an enthusiast. It should also be recorded that the main eastern monastic tradition was that of Basil of Caesarea, and was very different.

Basil's monasticism was a development of the commune type pioneered by Pachomius in the early 4th century. But while the monasteries of Pachomius were large sprawling groups, Basil limited his groups to around 30 members. Also, their role was very different. The Pachomian type could become pressure groups, mobilised to terrorise both pagans and heretics. Schnoudi, the notorious abbot of the White Monastery in Nitria (Egypt) could turn up with his followers at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and swing the council against Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople, Schnoudi's contribution was to hurl a large book at him!

By contrast, Basil's monasteries concentrated on such socially useful tasks as teaching and running hospitals, not to mention the invaluable work of copying manuscripts. For, unlike some hermits who despised the mere written word of Scripture, Basil and his followers were good theologians.

It also has to be said that hermits were not by any means examples of holy humility. There were bitter competitions between hermits as to who could say the most prayers or do the greatest number of genuflections. Theodoret of Cyrrhus watched Simeon Stylites at the top of his pillar do over 1500 genuflections, after which Theodoret lost count!

Now all this is not to say that there is no value in the retreat to the desert cell or the Celtic *keel*. Indeed, it is very necessary that any Christian should have some secret

place where s/he can meet Christ in secret (as he commanded in Matthew 6:6). However, the room that Jesus recommends is the storeroom of the peasant cottage, not the comfortable study that some would desire. But, all this is preparatory to coming back out into the world.

It is here that the new monastics should take note. It may be pleasurable to retreat to the cell, but God has work for us to do. Back in the late 6th century, Gregory the Great could complain that he had been dragged away from the contemplative life he loved to face the active life outside. Similarly, Martin of Tours had literally to be dragged from his hermitage by the folk of Tours to be their bishop/minister. But he became the great evangelist who first brought the gospel to rural France. I think the Spirit of Christ was with the people when they hauled the holy hermit from his cell.

Even when the hermits stayed in their cells, God had means of bringing the world to them. Around AD1000, the Viking pirate Olaf Tryggvason was forced to overwinter in the Scilly Isles. After finding that the usual Viking entertainments of boozing and fighting were boring (and not very good for his health—he got injured in a fight), he spent time talking with a Christian hermit who was the only other inhabitant of the island. After several months of close conversation, Olaf asked the anonymous hermit to baptise him, as he wanted to become a Christian.

It is also worth noting that when eastern monasticism was transplanted to the western Celtic fringe, it tended to produce pioneer missionaries who went into the very hostile world of the Dark Ages. Often where they went, they established monastic communities which acted as ministers to evangelise their neighbourhoods. One great example is Columbanus of Luxeuil. Starting from Bangor, co Down, he travelled to the Frankish court. When they did not like his forthright preaching, he moved on, founding the great monasteries of St Gall (Switzerland) and Bobbio (N Italy), where he eventually died. One can see the same spirit later, when Winifred (Boniface) from Crediton in Devon evangelised much of Germany. Boniface is the patron saint of Germany and the inventor of the Christmas tree.

So, by all means encourage folk to have secret times with God, but always remember that this a prelude to getting out to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

***Mike Smith is retired and lives in Marsden, near Huddersfield.***



## **Response to *Bapticostals* by Douglas Harbour**

I rejoice at Israel Olofinjana's observations on the refreshing change that has come about with the establishment of a new style of Baptist church reflecting different ethnic and ecclesiastical traditions (*bmj*, April 2013).

Now, you would usually expect a 'BUT' after an opening sentence like mine, but I don't want either to be patronising or to take the opposite pole. My chief reason for this response is to challenge the polarisation that seems to be taken for granted in Israel's piece.

I should first state that I have no experience of the London scene. My experience has been mainly in middle-class, middle-England churches with a smattering of black, brown and yellow faces among a sea of white. I experienced in one of them the classic case to which Israel refers, of the Nigerian deacon who was ultra-respectful of the pastor's authority. It was in an earlier pastorate in inner-city Cardiff in the 70s, however, that I first heard the term 'bapticostal' used by a member to describe her son's (white membership) church in the West Midlands.

As to traditional Baptist church governance, the worst extremes evidently have persisted. I have known a shop steward come to a meeting determined to have his voice heard in the confrontational style of his trade union meetings; and a membership dominated by one family who had agreed on the outcomes before arriving at the meetings that were supposedly to 'discern the mind of Christ'. I chuckle when I recall visits to Leicestershire village churches where someone was described as being a 'big Baptist'—they may not have frightened the Devil, but they sure caused consternation among the saints! We would all acknowledge that there was more of the 'flesh' than the 'Spirit' to be encountered at such church meetings. Many of us, however, would want to maintain that this experience has been the exception rather than the rule, and, to be fair to Israel, he does acknowledge that the traditional model can and does work in many congregations.

On the other hand, abuses can afflict the new 'charismatic' churches. In the early days of child protection, when my wife was acquainting herself with the role of 'children's advocate', she was made aware of the category 'spiritual abuse'. In her other role as a counsellor she had to deal with at least one case of such abuse meted out by a church leader.

I am far from being a cynic, and I have experienced far less hurt from churches I have pastored than blessing and loving support, not least now that my wife is in her 6th year of suffering from Alzheimer's disease. But I sometimes have seen 'flesh' dressed up

as ‘Spirit’—when the claim to ‘strong leadership’ amounts to no more than an insistence on having my own way, or when manipulation is used instead of honest encouragement.

The main concern for me in Israel’s article is the way church government is seen as polarised: either ‘charismatic’ governance by ‘strong leaders’, or (by implication) weak leadership plus strong member-voting governance adding up to a stagnating church. In my long, most recent pastorate, in which the exercise of spiritual gifts was encouraged, the principle of ‘priesthood of all believers’ (translated ‘body ministry’ in charismatic churches in the 1980s) was firmly maintained, yet—without any appeal to respect my ‘authority’ as leader—the church allowed me to lead. (Just as an aside, Israel’s reference, to being ‘hindered by members having to vote on everything, including minor details such as what colour the wall of the church should be’, evoked two embarrassing memories of churches which invited me to take the decision on just such a matter—with dire and expensive results!)

A neighbouring, elder-led, charismatic church (with which we continue to enjoy close fellowship and partnership) flourished not just because of its ‘strong leadership’, but because its leaders recognised that their vision had to be shared and owned by the membership (who otherwise voted with their feet), and was a factor in their decision to introduce church meetings. Our two churches supposedly had radically different governance models—ours ‘congregational’ and theirs ‘presbyterian’ (yes, that is what having elders is), but both functioned well because members helped shape the vision and leaders were allowed to lead. Israel mentions those who are ‘happy that the leaders are taking the initiative to lead’. That should be a good thing, but it could also reflect a climate in which some members can be so consumed by the demands of their jobs that they have little energy or inclination to take a role themselves, or one in which members cannot be bothered to speak out against a ‘party line’. During my own ministry I sought to maintain a ‘pulpit supply’ of visiting preachers or gifted members who would uphold my own ‘evangelical’ convictions. Nevertheless I was gratified to receive a much-travelled member who proclaimed ‘At last I have found a church that permits me to think!’

So I would suggest that to grow and flourish as a church, there is an alternative to the charismatic/strong leadership model (though God bless you if that is working for you). A church whose members are loved, encouraged and released to employ their gifts, and who meet regularly to discern the mind of Christ, may also lovingly respect and authorise their leader to lead, recognising the call of God on his/her life. There is more than one style of leadership—I commend the style that creates an atmosphere in which members feel able to own a shared vision and grow their spiritual gifting within the

church and its outreach. At a recent teaching session for helping carers of dementia sufferers to create a supportive environment, this illustration was used—one in keeping with my sedentary lifestyle. Now retired: I cannot control the movements of my pond fish; my job is to create the conditions in which they will grow and flourish—and probably reproduce!

***Douglas Harbour is now retired and lives in Wallingford, Oxon. He can be contacted on [harbourd@gmail.com](mailto:harbourd@gmail.com).***

### ***Israel replies:***

Thanks, Douglas, for your detailed and well thought-out response. I do agree with you that there are times that charismatic/pentecostal styles of leadership could lead to spiritual abuse. I have seen cases of this and I have been a victim of it. I was not trying to polarise church governance as you suggested, but trying to raise the issues involved in both styles of leadership. My argument is that no church government is better than another. There are strengths in congregational ecclesiology and there are weaknesses, just as with charismatic or apostolic types of church government.

My conclusions are that within the LBA we now see both, and that the autonomy of Baptist churches means both will probably coexist. Having said this, I wish that each of our churches, irrespective of ecclesiology, will allow its congregation to take part in discerning God's mind for the church. I am also aware that this will be expressed in different churches in different ways. Thanks once again for your thoughts.

#### ***Can storytelling be theology?***

Stories are fundamental to our Christian faith – stories about God's action in the world; stories about people's experience of God; stories Jesus told. Many have their roots in historical events, but sometimes the boundary between fact and fiction is hard to define. The stories Jesus told were products of his imagination, and yet they are profoundly theological. Exploring storytelling as a means of doing theology is not a new idea, but I am not aware of opportunities to do this within our Baptist community. I am sure there would be value in finding a way of bringing imagination and theological reflection together in this way – to encourage storytelling, to share stories we have created and to get feedback.

Do get in touch with me if you know of anything along these lines that exists already, if you have ideas as to how it might be done, or if you're interested in being part of such a group.

Peter Shepherd (Stoneygate Baptist Church Leicester; [shepherd.peter@talk21.com](mailto:shepherd.peter@talk21.com))

# Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

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***Faith and the future of the countryside***

Alan Smith & Jill Hopkinson (eds)

Canterbury Press £19.99

ISBN 978-1-84825-117-5

***Reviewer: Bob Little***

For centuries, the church in the UK has been actively engaged with rural communities. It's not only been a prophetic voice but has also been actively and practically involved with every issue affecting rural life.

As times, technologies, trends and tendencies continue to change, this book, by Alan Smith, the Bishop of St Albans, and Jill Hopkinson, the Church of England's National Rural Officer, seeks to provide insights into, and practical guidance on, key issues affecting mission in rural communities. It also aims to enable its readers to respond to contemporary needs with wisdom and imagination.

Smith and Hopkinson have gathered the perspectives of 12 eminent and not-exclusively Anglican authorities on aspects of rural ministry including: rural

communities' changing profile; health and wellbeing; the rural economy; the local effects of climate change; the rural church's pastoral mission, along with spirituality and the countryside. It examines issues such as the effects of the absence of affordable housing and the principles and practice of 'just food'.

This country's rural populations are still growing by some 80 000 a year. While agriculture is still a major factor in these communities, there is a changing spiritual dimension. Increasingly, humans' intricate relationship with the natural world is being reflected in policy and decision making.

Rural areas tend to reflect a wider wealth distribution than do urban communities. Thus, rural communities include the very wealthy and the poor—with some 20% of rural households living at or below the poverty line. Poverty, especially among the young and allied to a lack of affordable housing, raises issues over some rural communities' sustainability.

It's disappointing that young peoples' issues and rural schooling are omitted from this book's specific discussions. Maybe, since the rural church is already active in both these areas, the editors feel that there's little to be said here that's new. However, the issues which the book does choose to include are both pertinent and discussed with genuine and perceptive insight into the contemporary

scene. Its pages offer the opportunity for theological reflection as well as suggesting themes for preaching, along with ideas for practical action in response to issues affecting whole rural communities—not just congregations—today.

***Mindful ministry***

Judith Thompson & Ross Thompson

SCM 2012

ISBN 978-0-334-04375-1

***Reviewer: Sally Nelson***

If the word ‘mindfulness’ throws you into a panic, then be reassured—this is not a book about Buddhist practice, although it is a contemplative vision of ministry.

Judith and Ross Thompson are both Anglican priests well acquainted with the changing landscape of ministry. In particular they identify the pressures of being an ordained minister in the modern context of acceleration towards the recognition of every-member ministry. Where does this leave those who believe themselves called of God to a life of vocational service? Such men and women may not be objectively ‘better’ at the tasks of ministry—and so what is our role in this brave new world of church?

The Thompsons define mindful ministry as ‘waking up’ to our true nature in Christ so that instead of feeling deskilled and threatened, and responding from ragged emotion, we can undergo a *metanoia* that

leaves us free to exercise a wholesome and fruitful leadership of others, seeing the minister as a conductor or holder of others, not a sole practitioner.

The Thompsons take eight types of minister identified from the New Testament (apostle, holy one, pastor, teacher, leader, go-between, herald and liberator) and consider each type, then use a theological reflection model to examine how mindfulness might enhance and develop these ministries. Any type of ministry is prone to distortion in three main ways: becoming ‘absent-minded’ (*ie* too cerebral), ‘ego-minded’ (too success focused), or ‘mindless’ (an over-busy but unreflected ministry).

The book analyses each ministry type and its distortions exhaustively and I found this a bit wearisome and confusing. I kept identifying and then rejecting types for myself so I am not sure that it helped me to analyse my own style and weaknesses—but although that is the temptation of the reader it is maybe not the intention of the authors.

The book did offer plenty of general helpful reflection on ministry and its pitfalls, and I am persuaded by the value of being ‘mindful’—not subject to emotional reactions to challenges but able to respond calmly and intelligently to what comes up. I am sure many of us would benefit from doing it. I just need to put it into practice now.

***Beyond 400: exploring Baptist futures***

D. J. Cohen & M. Parsons (eds)  
Pickwick Publications, Oregon, 2011  
ISBN 978-1-60899-337-6

***Reviewer: Gethin Abraham-Williams***

What are Baptists for?—particularly in a post-denominational, postmodern culture. The 400th anniversary of our existence as a distinctive community within the wider Christian family provided an opportunity for discussing and offering answers to this unavoidable question.

One highly laudable attempt was that made by a group of mainly Australian academics meeting for a two-day conference in Perth in 2010, with the added attraction of Nigel G. Wright (Spurgeon's College Principal) as keynote speaker. Fifteen papers were presented on a variety of topics of interest to Baptists, and subsequently published as *Beyond 400*.

Maybe it is misreading the conference's terms of reference to have expected a colloquium with such an array of contributing Baptist scholars, on a topic as major as 'exploring Baptist futures', at such a seminal moment, to have produced something more accessible while still retaining academic credibility.

For example, any major Christian tradition wanting to be taken seriously and with something serious to say about

God as incarnate and resurrecting in a largely secular age, cannot avoid a theological critique of the major movements shaping our world at the beginning of this third millennium, such as justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

In his paper on *Humane religion: evangelical faith, Baptist identity and liberal secularism*, Nigel Wright provides the theory for such an approach, and Scott Higgins (from Baptist World Aid, Australia) in his analysis of *Baptists in mission to and with the poor: what do we need to learn?* tackles the controversial issue of the mission rationale behind the activities of some 'Christian' aid agencies, but the tenor of the collection as a whole is too muted.

In short, my main cavail with this worthy collection of papers, ranging as they do over a broad spectrum of topics of particular interest to Baptists, from baptism to holy communion, from church as a covenanted community to inter-church relations, from styles of church leadership, to the uses of social media outlets, is that they read too much like an internal discussion among coreligionists, rather than of setting out a position demanding attention in the public square.

In a world where the issues are religious extremism, global warming, iniquitous inequalities, and mind-stretching

advances in scientific knowledge, anything less is to miss an opportunity to engage a wider constituency at such a significant moment in our life and witness as Baptist Christians.

All in all, nevertheless, *Beyond 400* is worth dipping into, but I think Baptist futures are too important not to be addressed in a way that engages a world teetering on the edge of some alarming futures less obliquely and not so sectarian.

***Grounded in grace: essays to honour Ian M. Randall***

P.J. Lalleman, P.J. Morden & A.C. Cross  
Manna Christian Bookshop, 147-9,  
Streatham High Road, London SW16 6EG  
ISBN 978-0950068244

***Reviewer: Roger Hayden***

These essays for Ian Randall, in celebration of his 65th birthday, reflect his interest as a church historian, writing about Baptists, and the Anabaptist movement, in the context of evangelicalism and spirituality. An all-too-brief biographical sketch of Randall himself is illuminated by a helpful bibliography indicating the breadth and depth of his work.

Randall has worked 'to dispel misapprehensions of the nature of Evangelical faith', and has shown a strong interest in 'spirituality and social

involvement', in the process encouraging broader sympathies among the worldwide Baptist community.

There are essays dealing with English Baptists from the 17th-20th centuries. Sharon James presents Abraham Booth's defence of believer's baptism by immersion. Tim Grass addresses undenominationalism in Britain 1840-1914; and Linda Wilson offers *Three Nonconformist women and public life in Bristol*—Baptists will be pleased to have the inclusion of Katherine Robinson, of Tyndale, Bristol, as one of them. Brian Stanley analyses the contribution made by 94 Baptist delegates to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. T.B. Welch considers the 1904-5 Welsh Revival and the 1921 'forgotten revival' at Lowestoft of which Douglas Brown, the Baptist minister at Ramsden Road, Balham, became initially the reluctant and then perceptive leader.

European themes include Lydie Kucova on the three major streams of *Baptists in Czech Lands*. Toivo Pilli on Adam Podin's life (1862-1941), an Estonian Baptist with international links and 'pan-evangelical vision'. Erich Geldbach considers *Jews in the mindset of German evangelicals*; and Keith Jones guides us through the transformation within the EBF, when the Soviet Union collapsed during 1989-92.

The last five essays are more theological.

Anthony C. Cross writes about *Knowledge by experience*, and considers aspects of Baptist baptismal spirituality with reference to Glenn Hinson.

John Colwell's question *What is truth?* faces an important issue for evangelicalism. Andrew Kirk wrestles with the notion of 'integral mission', where settling the diverse forms of mission is relatively easy, but it is much harder to do justice to their unity. The nature, consequences and causes of poverty, lead on to a helpful consideration of 'economic life as intended by God'.

Lina Andronoviene's unusual *Struggling with female happiness: God's will and God's blessing in primary evangelical theology*; is followed by Simon Jones' thoughtful, *Hearing what is written to recover our future*, and are both demanding reads.

Nigel Wright confronts the themes of election and predestination in 17th century Baptist Confessions. He gives a good Baptist overview, but regretfully these themes are not set more obviously within the wider setting of the doctrine of the church, which those who wrote the Confessions believed to be as important, if not more important, than defining an evangelical Christian.

Peter Morden's question is: *Was John Bunyan a seventeenth-century*

*Evangelical?* since Bunyan pre-dates the origin of evangelicalism in 1730. A study of *The Pilgrim's Progress* suggests continuity, yet within it Bunyan reveals a significant discontinuity. Assurance is at the heart of evangelicalism, but Bunyan was never at peace, and his conversion has 'always been difficult to identify' in the pages of *Grace abounding*.

Morden raises a serious question: 'is "Evangelicalism" only to be found post-1730?' In the late 19th century, R.W. Dale, saw the Congregational churches as 'at once the trustees and heirs of the great traditions of Evangelicalism which 'strikes its roots....into a remoter past and are the living representatives of an earlier, and in some respects greater religious movement. Puritanism had a majesty and grandeur to which Evangelicalism could lay no claim. It had profounder learning, and more friendly relations to all the provinces of human thought, and all the triumphs of human genius. It had more intellectual vigour...'. Dale concluded, 'There is very much that is admirable in modern Evangelicalism that was not present in the earlier, but if we have gained much, I ask—have we lost nothing?' .

Those reading these essays may wish that a Baptist evangelical will attempt to answer the question: 'What, on earth, is the church for?' An important question for contemporary English Baptists.



### ***Sermon preparation***

C. B. Larson (ed)

Hendrickson

ISBN: 978-1-59856-960-5

#### ***Reviewer: Bob Little***

Traditionally, Baptists have placed great emphasis on preaching the word within the context of corporate worship. In turn, this can place pressure on the preacher to produce sermons that are original, insightful, useful, challenging, comforting—and a host of other adjectives too—on a weekly basis. In the past, the old limerick may have held true:

*There was a young Baptist called 'Spurgey',  
who didn't like our liturgy.*

*His sermons were fine:*

*I made some of them mine—*

*and so did the rest of the clergy!*

Plagiarising others' work and not being found out is harder in today's digital age, so this book—30 contributions from eminent speakers, preachers and teachers—offers tried and tested tips and techniques (rather than content) for sermon success.

The first half of the book provides perspectives on 'preparing your heart and honing your skills'. The latter part of the book contains interviews with 15 preachers on 'how I prepare a sermon', offering important insights into each individual's sermon preparation process. These insights' main value is in stressing

the length of time and degree of dedication needed to study the scriptures, along with amplifying material, to distil the relevant wisdom that God's word contains.

The first part of this book contains a wealth of practical advice and guidance—covering not just the 'how to' (such as 'five hammer strokes for creating expository sermon outlines') but also the 'what' ('liking the lectionary') and, importantly, the 'why' ('Facebook sermon prep').

The extemporaneous and the script-based approach to sermon preparation and delivery are examined, as is writing more than one sermon a week. There's an essay on the value of teamwork in preparing and critiquing sermons. There's even a chapter on preparing mentally to preach, likening preachers to other performance artists.

As someone who not only composes and delivers sermons but also listens to others' sermons regularly, it's easy to see the need for a book such as this. As in every walk of life, fashions come and go.

Yet certain precepts and techniques always have—and will always—mark out the successful preacher. This book attempts to identify at least some of them. As such, it should be a valuable addition to any preacher's library.

***The art of curating worship: reshaping the role of the worship leader***

Mark Pierson

Canterbury Press, 2012

ISBN 978-1-84825-194-6

***Reviewer: Andy Goodliff***

Mark Pierson is a leading light in the alternative worship movement. He's from New Zealand and also a Baptist. He was pastor of Cityside Baptist Church, which over a number of years did an increasingly popular 'stations of the cross' experience, the story of which can be found in the book.

The book tells how Pierson identified connections between visiting an art exhibition and Christian worship. Pierson suggests that worship leaders should see themselves as curators—more 'a maker of context rather than presenter of content'—creating and shaping spaces and opportunities for people to worship God, where they bring meaning to the worship event.

Pierson believes worship leaders can learn much from the curator. Worship curation is about allowing the full spectrum of arts to flourish, not as additions—like the occasional drama, poem or painting—but as fully integrated ingredients of a worship event (Pierson prefers the language of 'event' over 'service'). The worship curator pays attention to everything;

how a space is set out is as important as readings, prayers, hymns/songs etc.

The main part of the book explores the philosophy behind curating worship (headings like participation, open-endedness, failure), the different practices involved in worship curation (such as pace, space, silence, takeaways, juxtaposition, liturgy) and how community is built through curating worship (collaboration, hospitality, interactivity, and more). There are chapters on creating worship 'stations'; the context of worship (is it the weekly communal church gathering, or is it designed to be more open and inclusive of those with little or no faith and so more 'transitional' or 'guerilla') and on contemporary stations of the cross.

There is much to stimulate, challenge and enjoy in this book. It would be good read alongside Jonny Baker's *Curating worship* (SPCK, 2010), which is similar, but different in that it collects together a number of stories and examples of worship curation in action, and also Stuart & Sian Murray-Williams' excellent *Multi-voiced church* (Paternoster, 2012). The book won't convince everyone, but it will make every minister/worship-leader, stop and think about the worship they lead on behalf of the congregation.

***Chasing an elusive God: the Bible's quest and ours***

Ray Vincent

Christian Alternative, 2013

ISBN 978-1-84694-714-8

**Reviewer: Peter Shepherd**

The title of this excellent and provocative book suggests that God has hidden himself away, or at least is very well camouflaged, and that those who want to discover him are like anglers trying unsuccessfully to lure him onto a line (Jesus, the author says, 'seems to slip through our fingers whenever we try to grasp him'). Its main theme is the Bible—not a book of answers to our religious questions, but as an account of people's search for God and how that is like our own. Scripture is quoted on just about every page. The scope and range of Biblical references are huge, as the author takes us on an express tour through the variety of ways in which God is spoken of. At times, the journey does seem rather too hasty—the chapter headed *The mystery of God* covers, in no more than 22 pages, sections on *Single or plural?*, *The battle for monotheism*, *Maker of good and evil?*, *Three in one?* and *A person or not?*, among other things.

The author is keen to point out ambiguities and contradictions, most of which will be familiar to students of the Bible. Some eyebrows will be raised at

the claim that the 'innumerable discrepancies' in the gospels mean that we can never know exactly what Jesus said and did. In both the Old and New Testaments, we are told, we find stories that have been created and shaped by communities trying to make sense of their experiences. As we read these stories, it is their meaning for those communities, rather than their historical accuracy, that is important.

But the overall message of the book is positive, and if it encourages readers unfamiliar with the Bible to 'dip into' it—or even have a bit of a swim—it will have done a good job. It concludes that the person of Jesus is the key in our quest for God. It is attractively and accessibly written, and I am sure will be useful not only as an introduction to the Bible for non-religious people, but also for the Christian who is growing dissatisfied with conventional, trite answers to complex questions and is eager to explore more seriously how the Bible should be read. Some will find it a little too radical for comfort.

Our search for God is important, of course, but in claiming that this quest is the central feature of our faith, does the author miss something even more significant? I wonder, could it be that in reality, we are the ones who are hiding, and God is the one doing the chasing?