

JOHN WILLIAMS

# Alien Voices: Listening to Faith's Passionate Agnostics

**John Williams argues that the churches need a mission strategy that is about more than reasserting historic orthodoxy as clearly and confidently as possible. There is a need for genuine dialogue, a readiness to listen to and learn from the voices of those who are passionately committed to spiritual exploration and theological questioning, but cannot be part of the church.**

## Setting the Scene: two Snapshots from Church and Culture

In April 2002 a document was issued by the 38 Primates (Archbishops of Provinces) of the Anglican Communion at the end of a week-long meeting in Canterbury. It begins:

In the light of current challenges to historic Christian faith from various quarters, and of the growing influence of different kinds of 'post-modern' theory which question the very idea of universal and abiding truth, the Primates wish to reaffirm the commitment of the Anglican Communion to the truths of the fundamental teachings of the faith we have received from Holy Scripture and the Catholic Creeds.

There follow five brief paragraphs, headed 'Our God is a living God', 'Our God is an incarnate God', 'Our God is a triune God', 'Our God is a faithful God', and 'Our God is a saving and serving God.' At one or two points the authors indicate which erroneous views their statement is designed to target: non-realism – 'God is infinitely more than a thought in our minds or a set of values for human beings'; liberal reductionism – 'We believe that [the Resurrection] is not simply a perception or interpretation based on the subjective experience of the apostles'; and post-modernism, as in the introductory paragraph. The aim seems to be a massive reassertion of orthodoxy, the assurance that the Gospel is safe in the Primates' hands.

Let us now switch from the religious news pages to a glimpse of the cultural context. The *Church Times* during the very same month of April 2002 contains a lengthy interview with novelist Philip Pullman, author of the children's trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The best-selling final volume, *The Amber Spyglass*, contains a scene in which God dies, 'with a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.' Throughout the trilogy, the Church is pictured as oppressive and bigoted. Pullman

tells the interviewer: 'Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him. Wherever you look in history, you find that. It's still going on.' He acknowledges the good in some aspects of Christian teaching – forgiving our enemies, looking for a world of freedom and equality – but reacts with anger to the suggestion that belief in God is needed in order to sustain these things:

I'm amazed by the gall of Christians. You think that nobody can possibly be decent unless they've got the idea from God or something. Absolute bloody rubbish! Isn't it your experience that there are plenty of people in the world who don't believe who are very good, decent people?...It comes from ordinary human decency. It comes from accumulated human wisdom – which includes the wisdom of such figures as Jesus Christ...what a pity the Church doesn't listen to him!

So here we have, all in a couple of weeks' worth of religious journalism, two very indicators about the style of missionary engagement with contemporary culture. Here is the unbeliever, very negative about the church but nonetheless deeply interested in spiritual and existential questions. And there is the church in its institutional manifestation, taking responsibility for the dissemination of information about Christian believing and living, with a missionary purpose. The Primates' strategy is one of *confidence* and *reassurance*: the world can take courage that the church continues to proclaim historic, orthodox Christianity, a preachable Gospel, and has no truck with dangerous and damaging departures from the doctrinal norm. By contrast, Pullman is likely to be deeply unmoved, even stiffened in his anti-church resolve, when faced with such a strategy. Can the church find another way of engagement with the committed spiritual questioner, the passionate agnostic?

## All Singing from the same Hymn-sheet?

The churches today seem keen to 'connect'. Statistics on church attendance and other indices of religious vitality pour forth from church central offices and research units. Continuing Ministerial Education provision includes courses on how to handle the Press; doubtless In-Service Training programmes for bishops cover the vexed matter of looking good on television. Popularly written books about 'new ways of being church' become flavour of the month<sup>1</sup>. It is not very likely that the incident reported by Monica Furlong could happen today, when Archbishop Michael Ramsey, at a press conference, responded to a question about the future of the church by saying it was 'not certain, not certain, not certain at all...it might easily, easily, quite easily just fall away'<sup>2</sup>.

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1 See Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: quantum changes in Christian ministry*, IVP, Leicester 2000; Michael Nazir-Ali, *Shapes of the Church to Come*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 2001; Michael Moynagh, *Changing World, Changing Church*, Monarch, London 2001; Steven Croft, *Transforming*

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*Communities: Re-imagining the Church for the 21st Century*, DLT, London 2002; Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 2002.

2 Monica Furlong, *C of E: the State it's in*, Hodder & Stoughton 2000, p 117.

Nevertheless, at present the omens are not that good for genuine engagement with the theological and spiritual questions of the public. The name of the game seems more to be (rather belatedly, it seems) 'modernisation', a kind of spring-clean of existing structures to update them and introduce an air of brisk, hi-tech pizzazz into them. The message is of a rather worrying closing of ranks:

In Madeleine Bunting's words, '[The archbishop] firmly believes everyone has to sing from the same song sheet for the Church to communicate a clear message, and conveys this to bishops and clergy.' (from *The Guardian*, May 1998). She likens this insistence on 'coherence' and 'staying on message' to Blair's Labour Party. It is a new, and worrying departure for those who had seen the Church's strength as 'always having been its diverse, unwieldy, almost 'anarchic' self. 'If we are leaders together', she quotes the Archbishop's own words, 'we must not be irresponsible by questioning the faith of the Church.'... Yet the bishops who have done this... have found a fascinated and grateful following among many who stood outside or on the fringes of the Church... Is a rigid conformity likely to work much better, with all lips buttoned and uncertainties ignored?<sup>3</sup>

'We must not be irresponsible by questioning the faith of the Church'. How then can the churches hear the alien voices that might lead them down new and challenging paths of truth-seeking? The former Managing Editor of SCM Press, Alex Wright, put this trenchantly in his book *Why Bother with Theology?* A non-churchgoer, Wright is passionate about theology and the vital questions he believes it is the task of theology to explore and keep on the social and cultural agenda. He does not mince his words:

I would suggest forcefully that people are as interested in religious and theological issues as they ever were, but that their needs and anxieties have been neglected woefully by a Church that has lost touch with how to communicate what is most important to us, and what is most crucial to it. And that missing component is a workable and credible narrative for life.<sup>4</sup>

The charge becomes more specific: what the Church fails to see is 'that its conceptuality needs to cohere with what people are realistically likely to be able to understand in an age of multiple distraction and contextual dissonance'.<sup>5</sup> This requires a 'strategic imagination' in conveying the force of and the invitation into 'the fundamentals that preoccupied Jesus'. And the point about these is that they are not *firstly* about 'right doctrine' at all.

Some will immediately think that the phrase 'what people are realistically likely to be able to understand' is just a throwback to the old discredited liberal tag about 'what modern man can believe'; but on closer inspection Wright means something significantly different. The earlier liberal diagnosis assumed that people were familiar with traditional Christian doctrines but could no longer believe in them, chiefly on account of the alternative accounts of things now advanced by

3 Furlong, *C of E*, pp 156-7.

4 Alex Wright, *Why Bother with Theology?* DLT, London 2002, pp.5-6.

5 Wright, *Why Bother?* pp 8-9.

rationalism and science. Hence, traditional doctrines would need to be trimmed. But Wright is far from being an old-fashioned 'modernist'; indeed he is profoundly critical of the heritage of liberal culture and expects a vigorous Christianity to challenge it. His concerns are distinctly *soteriological*: people are missing out on the hope held out by the Gospel, not because science or any other source of knowledge appears to contradict it, but because Christianity and 'church' simply don't connect in the remotest fashion with what makes people tick. It isn't therefore a matter of liberal 'accommodation' but of starting over again with the whole process of engagement in an entirely different place.

### The Alien Voices of Agnostic Theology

The 'entirely different place' is wherever theological insights and perceptions come to light in a non-church context. Many of these are far from obscure or academic. They include best-selling novels and contemporary rock music. Take for example Joanne Harris' novel *Chocolat*<sup>6</sup>, also familiar to many as a popular film. The story dramatizes the showdown in a provincial French village between the life-denying, buttoned-up religion of the local church and its repressed young priest Father Reynaud, and newly-arrived *chocolatier* Vianne Rocher, exotic and mysterious with a past life of restless travelling, improbable adventures and a hint of paganism and witchcraft. Reynaud touches the lives of the villagers with the hand of death and denial, producing only lovelessness and bigotry. Rocher, on the other hand, brings release, courage, warmth and passion. An abused wife finds the courage to leave her husband and discover her potential; a lonely old man with his dog escapes his shyness and begins to socialise; a mollycoddled schoolboy cuts loose of his mother's apron strings and starts to live.

The story unfolds during the course of Lent: for the church, the traditional season of self-denial and abstinence, marked by Reynaud's cold, scolding sermons and campaign for the eviction of the river gypsies who have moored their houseboats in the village. But Lent for Rocher carries its pre-Christian meaning: the overture of springtime, frost melting, leaves budding, hope re-born, symbolized in the grand, alluring and sensual Festival of Chocolate she plans to coincide with Easter. Through her attention the leader of the river gypsies, no longer despised and rejected, attains a new found social inclusion and personal esteem. (Rocher herself leaves the village secretly carrying his child.) In a hugely comic denouement, the priest eventually succumbs to temptation, breaks into the *chocolaterie* on Easter Eve, gorges himself upon chocolate and falls asleep, to awaken on Easter morning in the shop window before the astonished gaze of the parishioners. He is disgraced, fallen, but humanized – rising to his new life of sensual indulgence on Easter Day. Here is a popular, persuasive and powerful portrayal of ideas of salvation, wholeness and sheer delight, expressed in the unconventional, eclectic, *bricolage* religion embodied in the *chocolaterie*.

As a further example of 'secular testimony' in widely read recent writing, Nick Hornby's *How to be Good*<sup>7</sup> offers a wry and astute commentary on the inner and outer textures of the relationship between religion and *goodness*. The narrator, Katie

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6 Joanne Harris, *Chocolat*, Black Swan Books 2000.

7 Nick Hornby, *How to be Good*, Penguin Books, London 2001.

Carr, is a doctor with a career stuck in a rut and a marriage running out of steam, but no 'major' problems: her self-image is of a 'good person', which she *must* be because she is a doctor whose whole business is doing good to the suffering (including being the sort of person who is willing to look at rectal boils). But if this is so, why is she committing adultery and why is she finding her husband David's opiated rants (he writes a newspaper column under the tag 'the angriest man in Holloway') so insufferable? When David encounters an eccentric faith healer called GoodNews and apparently experiences some kind of (unorthodox) religious conversion that transforms his mood into one of unflappable serenity, full of the milk of human kindness, she copes still less. Guided by GoodNews, David begins to take on acts of selfless, one might say, reckless, generosity. He gives away their son's computer to a women's refuge and donates their Christmas dinner to the homeless on Christmas Day. He invites all the neighbours round and unveils a plan for all of them to take in homeless people and accommodate them in their surplus capacity spare rooms. And she resents it all: 'I'm a good person, I'm a doctor, and here I am championing greed over selflessness, cheering on the haves against the have-nots.'

In desperation she goes to church one Sunday. Hornby's description of the congregation, and the service, is hilarious in itself ('the sparsity of the congregation, and its apparent lack of interest in anything or anyone, allows us to sit towards the back and pretend that we're nothing to do with anyone or anybody'). The mad vicar launches into a chorus of 'Getting to know you' from *The King and I* during her sermon. But Katie is grabbed by part of the message: 'God isn't interested in you being artificially good, because that prevents Him from discovering you'. The reading from 1 Corinthians 13 strikes home: 'Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up'. The elusive texture of goodness starts to feel a bit plainer; less heroic and exotic, more bound up with normality. Maybe the gulf between her 'goodness' as a doctor and her 'badness' as a discontented and unfaithful wife can be bridged after all. Now of course, this isn't one of those evangelical tales of Christian conversion leading to repentance, forgiveness and happily-ever-after contentment with one's lot. But what does happen is that, shortly after this 'revelation', GoodNews, as might have been expected, is revealed in his turn to have feet of clay, failing utterly in his attempt to be reconciled, by telephone and positive psychic energy, with his own estranged sister and collapsing in a foul-mouthed outburst of frustration. GoodNews feels a failure: 'you know, it's love this, and love that, and I fucking hate her'. It's the breaking of the spell. With GoodNews gone, the good news remaining is that married life can get back to normal; nothing heroic, nothing unreal, but just possibly some scope for an ordinary goodness that sits alongside folly and failure.

Elsewhere young (and not so young) people are taking in lyrical content from rock and dance songs which pose challenging questions about belief, values and meaning against the horizon of an often confusing social context. Sometimes this is explicit in its religious connotations. *Faithless* is the name of a successful dance act with a top-selling album entitled *Reverence*. Their hit single *God is a DJ* opens with the words, spoken into an echoey silence, 'This is my church: this is where I

heal my hurts'. Eclectic rock/dance artist Moby has made no secret of his unorthodox Christian allegiance. His music regularly imports samples of classic blues and Gospel numbers and his original compositions bear overtly religious titles such as *God Moving on the Face of the Waters* and *Memory Gospel*, and offer multi-layered soundscapes which incorporate simulations of choral performance as well as electronic beats and moments of sacred quietness. His huge-selling 1999 album *Play* contains in the sleeve notes a text denouncing all forms of religion based on dogmatic closure:

Fundamentalism (of any kind) troubles me...So many religious and political and social and scientific systems fail in that they try to impose a rigid structure onto what is an inherently ambiguous world...if we base our belief systems on the humble assumption that the complexities of the world are ontologically beyond our understanding, then maybe our belief systems will make more sense and end up causing less suffering.<sup>8</sup>

A few years ago, American singer/songwriter Joan Osborne had a top ten hit with *One of Us*, a song which clearly portrays a person well familiar with the orthodox believing environment, now struggling with the conundrum of the faith as presented in it: does God have a name, does God have a face, and if you had to believe, could you, if this meant 'you had to believe in things like Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?' As a speculative alternative she wonders:

What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us?  
Just a stranger on the bus, Trying to make his way home,  
Back up to heaven all alone, Just like a holy rolling stone?  
Nobody calling on the phone – 'cept for the Pope maybe, in Rome.<sup>9</sup>

Others raise in a more secular context questions of philosophical importance mediated through aspects of contemporary (youth) culture. The Verve's 1997 classic album *Urban Hymns* betrays this stance in its title. A series of haunting songs written by vocalist Richard Ashcroft conjure up images of hope and loss, stoical determination and tenderness, a secularised spirituality of incompleteness and longing:

All this talk of getting old is getting me down, my love  
Like a cat in a bag, waiting to drown this time I'm coming down  
But I know you're thinking of me as you lay down on your side  
Now the drugs don't work, they just make you worse  
But I know I'll see your face again.<sup>10</sup>

Pulp's Jarvis Cocker wrote one of the most chilling accounts of recreational drug use, *Sorted for E's and Wizz* on the band's *A Different Class* album. The high of ecstasy is experienced in the context of a rave at an open-air festival, and teenage confusion is tellingly and painfully depicted in a passage spoken, not sung, with feeling by Cocker:

and this hollow feeling grows and grows and grows and grows, and you want to phone your mother, and say mother, I can never come home again, because

8 Moby, *Play*, Mute Records Limited 1999.

9 Joan Osborne, *One of Us*, written by Eric Bazilian, from the album *Relish*, PolyGram Records 1995.

10 The Verve, *The Drugs Don't Work*, written by Richard Ashcroft, from the album *Urban Hymns*, VC Records T/A Hut Recordings, 1997

I seem to have left an important part of my brain somewhere in a field in Hampshire

and so to the scary conclusion:

In the middle of the night, it feels all right, but then tomorrow morning...

Ooh, ooh when you come down...ooh, ooh when you come down...

Ooh...what if you never come down?<sup>11</sup>

Cocker and Ashcroft in their different ways point up the failure of the promise of drug use and raise poignantly the question of where alternative fulfilments are to be found.

A different context of alienation and the questions put by an excluded, unemployed underclass to the wider society is depicted by the Manic Street Preachers in their 1997 album *Everything Must Go* on the classic track *A Design for Life*:

Libraries gave us power, then work came and made us free;

What price now for a shallow piece of dignity?...

We don't talk about love; we just want to get drunk

We are not allowed to spend, and we are told that this is the end

A design for life.<sup>12</sup>

Again there is the disappointment of hopes, the failure of false promises and the fragments of glimpses of what might be better (here, education and employment). The concept of a 'design for life' itself captures the thrust of these messages: the quest for a configuration of values, beliefs, ways of behaving and belonging that will design meaning and fulfilment into life is a profoundly theological issue. But rarely will it be met in the first instance by a direct encounter with Christian orthodoxy at full throttle.

## Orthodoxy as Destination

Theology...needs to look, listen, and learn from others, rather than perpetually tell them what to think, how to worship, how to come back to church...

Theology needs to be more sinewy and fluid, less rigid and liturgically deterministic, in its appeal to those – the 'godfearers' and religious sympathisers – who cry for recognition in the wilderness...<sup>13</sup>

Alex Wright is articulating a common perception that the Church, in all its apparent desire to communicate, nevertheless wants to dictate the terms of engagement: there is always a hidden agenda in which 'believing the package as we do' remains the test of the authenticity of faith. It is this that excludes many even from considering the Church as a possible companion on the spiritual journey, and prompts them to seek less dogmatic alternatives. What he dubs 'loosely federated groups of like-minded truth-seekers, Christian activists and godfearers'<sup>14</sup> will spring

11 Pulp, *Sorted for E's and Wizz*, written by Jarvis Cocker, from the album *A Different Class*, Island Records Ltd, 1995.

12 Manic Street Preachers, *A Design for Life*, lyrics by Nicky Wire, from the album *Everything Must Go*, Sony Music Entertainment 1996

13 Wright, *Why Bother?* pp.63-4, 67

14 Wright, *Why Bother?* p.115.

up in other places. Here will be a space for theological exploration as ‘the codex for a federation of travellers on life’s way’, ‘the sensitive language of a Christian community that is outward-looking, self-effacing and non-dogmatic’<sup>15</sup>.

In some ways the current literature on emergent patterns of church life may seem to support this position; there is plenty of emphasis on the need for flexible, *ad hoc*, unthreatening contexts for informal engagement with seekers, enquirers, sympathetic agnostics and the rest! However, the burden of this essay is that there is a difference. In a nutshell, *new ways of being church will entail new ways of professing faith*. We shall no longer be able to make the assumption that all these alternative ‘ways in’ are just that, accessible ways in to orthodox faith and, by implication at least, to ‘standard church’. The groups of truth-seekers will *be* church, not para-church or pre-church. No more than perfect *orthopraxis* or right behaving is treated as a criterion for authentic believing (we all accept that in the realm of practical discipleship we are all on the way, engaged in lifelong learning) will *orthodoxy* or right believing be the point of entry into fully-fledged ‘church’ or Christian membership. If the Christian life by God’s grace is a journey towards Christ-likeness in character and behaviour, then by the same token it is a journey towards wholeness of believing, towards the disclosure of the fullness of the truth. Orthodoxy can only be the destination, and a destination that cannot by definition already be known in full and in detail at the outset, any more than we may know a city we have never visited just because we have seen a map. ‘Church’ will mean fellow-travellers including those who aspire to discipleship of Jesus but cannot assent to articles of dogma.

Some in the evangelical tradition (and the catholic too) will object that this is just another form of liberal capitulation: if post-modern culture cannot cope with objective truth-claims and meta-narratives, then let the church discard these as well. I do not think this is so. Among the many streams of tradition that feed into contemporary evangelicalism (of which plainly the more dogmatic tradition of Reformed Protestantism is one) there are some that embody what I would call the ‘reasons of the heart’, borrowing the phrase from Pascal, who claimed that ‘the heart has its reasons, of which the reason knows nothing’. Insofar as evangelical faith is, in John Wesley’s famous testimony, a religion of ‘the warmed heart’, it recognises at least implicitly that ‘sound doctrine’ is not always nor necessarily the first criterion of sound faith. Furthermore the relational, inter-personal dimension of faith, where warmed hearts come together in prayer and worship, in listening and learning, in fellowship, mutual support and ‘sweet charity’, is antipathetic to overly dogmatic formulations of truth: the fellowship and reciprocity of warmed hearts cannot (or should not) be restricted to the mutual appreciation society of the like-minded. To engage openly, honestly and charitably with other persons is to risk being changed, to learn and to grow. In different ways the Pietistic tradition that found theological expression in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the Wesleyan and Revivalist traditions, and the Pentecostal/Charismatic

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15 Wright, *Why Bother?* p.120.



movements, all bear witness to the 'reasons of the heart' as foundations for a living faith. Such 'reasons' would be readily identifiable in the alien voices of the impassioned agnostics we have touched upon here, and the churches need to be much less defensive and timid about affirming them.

### **Conclusion: The Travelling Company**

Alex Wright's phrase, 'the codex for a federation of travellers', is a brilliant *cameo* of the kind of thing a contemporary church theology might be. Creeds, doctrines and orthodox teachings would be treated as a *codex*, that is to say, the manuscripts of a community, the foundation documents, an 'authorised version' – all of these things, but not yet 'the truth', the final story, by no means 'all you need to know'. And the churches' various constituencies and congregations would be a *federation*, a union of communities of difference, gathered around a common vision but governed with independence, with separate laws and conventions and cultural styles. Lastly, *travellers*: not those who say 'we are already there, come and join us'; nor even the more humble-sounding 'we think we have found the way, come and let us help you'; but 'let us pool our resources and journey together, for in so doing we shall not only discover more about the eventual destination, but also make the way there much richer.' Something of this kind is going on in Tolkien's notion of the 'fellowship' of hobbits and elves, dwarves and men in *Lord of the Rings* – one reason, perhaps, for the way it so readily seizes the popular imagination. If the church is to commend itself and its faith more as a travelling company with a spiritual quest, and less as a secret society with a deposit of knowledge, it would do well to heed the alien voices that speak existential truth from unaccustomed places.

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