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Editorial

I recently received a number of back issues of the BMJ from a minister who was clearing his shelves prior to retirement. It came as something of a shock, browsing through copies of the Journal for 1963, to realise that these were 40 years old. Matters of concern included the debate generated by Bishop John Robinson's 'Honest to God', and how it was possible to engage with integrity of speech and understanding with both God and the world when some of the necessary links appeared to have been broken. It was refreshing to read some positive though not uncritical reflections and remember that we stand in a tradition of Baptists who can be generous and seek the good in their response to unfamiliar theological thinking.

Times change. What is there in common between yesterday's concern to explore 'religionless Christianity' and today's impulse to create crossing points between Christian faith and popular 'pan-spirituality'?

Perhaps the one seems to seek to liberate Christian faith from its formal structures of belief, whilst the other acknowledges that spirituality's perceived freedom from a religious and material framework is a mixed blessing. But the gospel's concern for engagement with the world in God's way still leads us to seek ways of making connections with the way people live and think 'outside of the church'. Truth to tell, in a media-dominated age unless we live as hermits we are ourselves always partly "outside the church" – and perhaps we do not always engage well because we are frightened of admitting it!

In this issue, engaging with the world and with God is addressed through different aspects. The first article has much in common with one of the strong echoes of 'Wisdom Literature' – God's order revealed in continuing creation and our responsibility to work in harmony with that. The consequences of cause and effect are such that human greed destabilises the balance of nature. Only repentance and grace will restore the energy needed for continuing material and spiritual life. But what if the so-called 'real world' is illusory and there is a secret way through to a higher realm? Does the influence of such gnostic-tending science-fiction films such as *The Matrix* provide a different sort of wisdom? And is there a way for pastors to re-invigorate pastoral care with the deliberate enterprise of Christian education? These and other questions emerge from the work shared by the other authors in this issue. **bmj**

It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely concerned as to whether we are religious or not. What matters to God, and matters supremely, is whether we are alive or not. If your religion brings you more fully to life, God will be in it; but if your religion inhibits your capacity for life or makes you run away from it, you may be sure God is against it, just as Jesus was.

John V Taylor "A Matter of Life and Death" SCM 1986

A Theology of Energy

John Weaver, Principal of South Wales Baptist College, thinks theologically about environmental issues.

1. Introductory remarks:

We live in a world that owes its origin and continuous creation to God.

We understand God to be both the creative origin of the universe and also its faithful sustainer. We recognise God's transcendence and God's immanence. God is both the creator who is before, after and beyond the world of space and time that we inhabit, and also the immanent creative spirit within creation.

We can speak of God as the creative power of creation, giving energy to the universe, while scientifically we talk in terms of heat, pressure, motion and entropy.

We understand God as the creator of earth's resources, and while we are right to speak of many of these resources as non-renewable, God continues his creative work, for example, in the delta swamps new lignite beds are forming that will in time become coal. However, it is true that for coal, gas and oil the time-scale is beyond human beings' future perspective.

But we also note that on a human time-scale, the finite quantities of uranium for nuclear fuel are far greater than our foreseeable needs.

We also recognise God as the faithful creator of the laws that govern the earth's motions. It is these that give rise to winds and waves, rainfall and rivers, which are the source of hydro-electric, wave and wind power – renewable forms of energy.

2. Current environmental concerns:

Today we live in a throw-away society. So much of what we use for our daily lives, be it milk cartons or cars, electrical goods or felt-tip pens, is disposable, designed to wear out or be put in the waste bin. Sadly, our society has a similar attitude to people and their needs or skills. So much of the way in which we live is controlled by short-term economics.

The world's population has soared from 5 million about 10,000 years ago, to 250 million at the birth of Christ, 2000 million in AD 1900, 5000 million in AD 1990, 6000 million in AD 2000, and a projected 7000 million by 2013. Better nutrition, control of disease through immunisation and improved sanitation have led to lower infant mortality and a resulting rise in population. Such an increase in population gives rise to growing demands for energy. But in 1980 one fifth of the population were destitute. "The bottom line" says Sean McDonagh, is that in most Third World countries the populations will be controlled. There is a limit to the carrying capacity of particular bio-regions, and famine, starvation and death can take over.²

When we consider the atmosphere and biosphere, we recognise the Greenhouse effect which is causing a rise in earth temperature, as the result of burning of fossil fuels creating a build up of Carbon dioxide gas in the atmosphere. Sulphur dioxide, produced in large quantities by power stations and other industry in which coal and oil is burnt, combines with water in the atmosphere to become the main source of acid rain.

Scientists are emphasising the delicate balance of nature. As many as 80% of animal and plant species are found in the rainforests. The rainforests also stabilise the world's climate - 60% of the rainfall is held and transpired back to the atmosphere. The forests also lock up billions of tons of carbon. Ecology is not a chain of cause and effect but a web of interconnectedness. "Once we learn that the lives of snails and sparrows are linked to our own in a dozen ways, the meaning of ecology gradually expands to include every other aspect of human life and well-being."³

The depletion of finite resources, be it fossil fuels or ocean plankton, sees us consuming the capital on which our economy is built; it is irreplaceable!

Globally there is a lethal spiral: people pressure on land leads to destruction of environment, which leads on to famine and migration, which produces ethnic and religious tension, through which society breaks down and further population growth takes place as a means of securing a future.

There are two important theological issues here:

- our relationship with the environment and
- our relationship with the rest of the living world, especially other human beings.

The results of the third Earth Summit, held at the end of August 2002 in Johannesburg, and entitled *World Summit on Sustainable Development*, were not encouraging. Environmentalist Jonathon Porritt commented that in the ten years since the first summit in Rio de Janeiro, only the UK can claim to have taken any steps in addressing the environmental and fair trade issues, and the UK has done only a little. The heart of the problem was

summed up by George Bush senior's comment in the light of the Rio declaration: "The American way of life is not negotiable." Unfortunately, you could put almost any nation in place of America, and recognise that this comment is the heart of the problem for world environmental and justice issues.

Issues of energy; along with water and sanitation; global warming; natural resources and biodiversity; trade; and human rights were all addressed at the summit. However, the only issue on which some modest progress was made was the commitment to halve the number of people lacking clean drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

3. UK Energy policies:

Among the key points in the report of the Performance and Innovation Unit, *The Energy Review*⁴ are:

- Increased dependence on gas
- Strong likelihood that the UK will need to make very large carbon emission reductions over the next century
- Establish new sources of energy which are, or can be, low cost and low carbon
- New investment in nuclear power and in clean coal are options to keep open
- Target 20% improvement in energy efficiency by 2010 and a further 20% by 2020
- Energy from renewable sources to be increased to 20% by 2020 (the Welsh Assembly decision in Spring 2003 for the establishment of wind farms is a response to this goal)
- Worries over the security of energy sources (for example terrorism or restrictions on trade between nations or an Iraq War).

The issue of climate change has been identified as a key challenge for our future energy system. Under the Kyoto Protocol

the UK faces internationally agreed targets for carbon emissions covering the period up to 2012.

A strategy to reduce CO₂ emissions by 2050 would require large changes in the energy system and society: efficiency; electricity produced without carbon emissions; reduction in fossil fuels in powering vehicles. Therefore there is a need for new options in renewable sources of energy and for new technologies.

In the long term they recommend that the Government bring together: energy policy, climate change policy, and transport policy in one department.

Amongst the main recommendations for the framework of energy policy is the following:

Where energy policy decisions involve trade-offs between environmental and other objectives, then environmental objectives will tend to take preference over economic and social objectives.⁵

This is a recommendation that we will want to commend as theologically important.

Over the last 50 years there has been a dramatic change in the sources of our energy:

Source	1950	2000
Coal	89.5%	15%
Crude oil	10.4%	32%
Gas	0.0%	43%
Nuclear	0.0%	9%
Renewables	0.1%	1%

The switch from coal to gas has reduced both acid gases and greenhouse gases. However, because 95% of UK CO₂ emissions result directly from fuel combustion, the energy system will be key to any action to reduce such emissions.

The main sources of these emissions in UK are; power stations 28%, industry and business 32%, transport 25%, and domestic heating 17%.

Sources of renewable electricity are: wind, wave, tidal, biomass and solar, which together may have a major part in power generation by 2050. Some like hydro-electric power have been established for many years. The UK is very well endowed with renewable resources, yet uses less renewable energy than most EU countries. Despite uncertainties, the assessment is that with continued support and development, renewables could be among the most cost effective options for reducing carbon emissions. By 2050 they could be producing large quantities of electricity.⁶ The Energy Futures Task Force, *Energy for Tomorrow: Powering the 21st Century* state that "whatever the mix of energy sources it seems certain that more, smaller generation stations will be used in the future. These will be sited either at the point of supply, as for wind, wave and biomass power, or at the point of demand, as for combined heat and power stations and embedded generation."⁷

The nuclear power option offers a zero carbon source of electricity on a scale, which, for each plant, is larger than that of any other option. "If existing approaches both to low carbon electricity generation and energy security prove difficult to pursue cheaply, then the case for using nuclear would be strengthened."⁸ Nuclear power is currently more expensive than fossil fuels (recent reports of insolvency and the need for Government subsidy). However, new reactors and a private market may make it a future option. The report says:

The desire for new options points to the need to develop new, low waste, modular designs of nuclear reactors,

and the UK should continue to participate in international research aimed in this direction.⁹

Currently nuclear power produces 25% of UK electricity, but in the coming 20 years all but one of the power stations will have reached their expected life span. Also there are environmental risks through disposal of existing and unavoidable waste, and of the risk of accidental radioactive releases, rather than routine emissions. The report states that although stringent UK and international regulations mean this risk is very low, the potential consequences of such accidents are very large.¹⁰

These governmental reviews and policy recommendations raise a number of important theological issues:

- God's faithful provision of coal, peat, wood, oil and natural gas. We celebrate God's creation.
- Human wisdom and understanding as part of our creation in the image of God. Our ability to explore and discover; to mine and refine; to research and develop new technologies.
- Human stewardship, which questions the use and exhaustion of fossil fuels; pollution; destruction of the ozone layer and resulting global warming, adverse climate change, and skin cancer; together with destruction of the landscape.
- Our theology needs to address the use and abuse of earth's resources; God's provision and our accountability for good stewardship; and creation and destruction within the environment.

4. Some initial reflections:

First, there are those renewable sources of energy: wind, waves, water/rivers/hydro-electric power, sun – solar energy, terrestrial heat sources in volcanic regions.

We can see these as the demonstration of God's faithfulness in continuing creation, ordering and provision, sustaining power.

However it would be wrong to suggest that because they are God-given that these sources of energy are entirely problem free. Much depends on how we use what God has given. We operate as co-creators with God, demonstrating the same approach of care for God's creation. For example, wind farms are pollution free but are not completely environmentally friendly. Modern windmills are not, in the eyes of some, aesthetically pleasing and when a dozen or more are placed in an advantageous hill-top position or on a cliff top they are thought to destroy the view and attractiveness of the environment. But we will want to question whether this is a selfish viewpoint.

On the other hand, the harnessing of wave power requires the development of barrages, which will have a considerable affect on the environment and the habitat of various species, especially shell fish, birds, algae and plankton life. The construction of barrages on coastal margins can lead to the shifting of sand and gravel banks, coastal erosion, and the permanent flooding of tidal flats, with the resulting loss of habitats (living next to the Cardiff Bay barrage, I see the results every day). However, it could also be argued that some new environments and habitats are created.

Hydro-electric power schemes require large reservoirs of water to provide a continuous flow through the turbines. There is therefore the need to build large dams and flood large areas of river valley up-stream of the dam. The result of these schemes is loss of environment and habitat, although again it could be argued that new habitats and environments are created.

The two sources of natural energy that do not result in substantial environmental "pollution" are solar and volcanic, but these are restricted to particular parts of the world. Iceland leads the way in tapping into volcanic heat sources, although there are places even in UK where this is possible. Solar energy is most reliable where weather conditions produce continuous sunshine all year round. However, even in northern European countries there is a growing use of solar power.

Secondly, there are the non-renewable resources of fossil fuels and minerals. The Bible leads us to recognise that the mineral resources of the earth are also part of God's provision in creation. But our use of these resources must be placed alongside our care for all of creation.

Fossil fuels have been vital in industrial development, but they have also been a major source of pollution. With radioactive minerals there are large reserves of a cheap source of fuel. Some describe this as a "clean" fuel as there are none of the pollution problems associated with the fossil fuels. But, there is the problem of radioactivity, which produces contamination of water supplies, sea, and soil, and which may have health risks for people. However, the significance of clusters of people suffering from cancer around the Sellafield nuclear power station have been disputed.

Radioactive isotopes have long half-lives, which means that the radioactivity will continue for hundreds and thousands of years. This has important implications for the disposal of radioactive waste and for the decommissioning of nuclear energy plants. Radioactive isotopes being washed into the sea or water table, or the leaking of radioactive waste that was buried at sea in past years has been seen as a cause of mutations in fish that have reduced their

capacity to reproduce. There is also the risk of accidents - the problems of Chernobyl are etched into European minds.

Once again we have theological questions, which involve God's creation and our stewardship. This stewardship involves our concern for the rest of creation including human beings.

5. Theological reflection:

The global considerations include pollution; destruction of the rain forests; global warming; and destruction of the Ozone layer.

The theological issues revolve about God's creation; our stewardship; and our concern for our sisters and brothers throughout the world. It is a matter of justice. Development which pollutes and undermines life-support systems is a contradiction in terms. It is here that we will want to note the responsibility of richer nations in terms of justice. Mere economic growth is not an indication of development, and injustice prevails where people's basic needs are left unmet. We can take Attfield's example of the plight of the tribal people of the Arfak Mountains in Indonesia, who are being denied the opportunity to exploit their natural resources. He says "it is morally unacceptable to claim that the needs of future generations for intact rainforest there justify us in disregarding these current needs. For if future people's needs count, so do the needs of our contemporaries."¹¹

God's involvement

Moltmann maintains that:

an ecological doctrine of creation implies a new kind of thinking about God. The centre of this thinking is no

longer the distinction between God and the world. The centre is the recognition of the presence of God *in* the world and the presence of the world *in* God.¹²

The ruthless conquest and exploitation of nature in the Enlightenment found its theological legitimisation in the distinction between the world and God. An understanding of God's immanence and presence through the Spirit help us to rectify this error.

For human beings to "have dominion" over nature is a challenge for us to act with God, imitating his loving kindness and faithfulness with the whole of creation.

From the Genesis account of creation we recognise that order is at the heart of God; it is his nature. We see the creator being free to exercise his will in all that he does, but God's acts are not fickle nor

arbitrary; his will is constrained by his character. Creation is an expression of God's creative purpose. The scientific enterprise of the Enlightenment depended on this understanding of order and predictability.

Land

To whom does the earth belong? "The Earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1).

Our unique relation with God leads to our ability to think, choose, create, love, pray, and exercise control. Research, discovery and invention, in biology, chemistry, physics and other spheres, and in all the triumphs of technology, is part of our God-given role. We co-operate with the processes of nature, we do not create them.

The first covenant, of which we read in the Bible, is made by God with Noah (Genesis 6:11-9:17). God commanded



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Noah to conserve nature (6:19). After the Flood God establishes his covenant with all of creation (9:8-14). The land is still to be fertile. But then we are led into a discussion of what sort of relation should creatures have with one another, and how can the violence and the killing be in accordance with God's absolute sovereignty?

The new covenant after the flood reminds us that we are always looking from the side of a broken creation. Paradise is lost; the groaning of creation (Romans 8:23) starts here.¹³

This is not a scientific problem but is based far more profoundly on human beings striving for power and control. The ecological crisis gives theology, science and technology a common task in saving the planet, as we share a common destiny. Moltmann maintains that the living relationship between human societies and the natural environment has been lastingly, if not irreparably, destroyed by human technologies which have exploited nature. He states that:

these concerns are governed by the basic values and convictions of human societies. And the values and convictions that prevail in human societies, and regulate public life, themselves derive from fundamental human convictions about the meaning and purpose of life¹⁴

and:

for the victim nature, scientific and technological civilisation is undoubtedly the most terrible monster ever to appear on earth. The results are so familiar that there is no need to describe them at any length. Everywhere uncontrollable processes of growth have sprung up: growing populations, industrial growth, growing pollution, a growing use of energy, a

growing exposure to stimuli, and growing mental and spiritual instability among men and women.¹⁵

For so-called progress, needs are fulfilled and demands grow, resources are exhausted and pollution increases.

Sin and Redemption

There must be the elimination of exploitation and poverty that prevents the poor from being fully human. So Christians should have a solidarity with the poor and should oppose poverty. Sin is the main factor in environmental destruction. Sin alienates us from God, our fellow human beings and from the natural world. In Jesus Christ there will be a new creation (Romans 8:18-23). The Spirit gives us the possibility to be what we are to become - the children of God. The whole creation awaits the revelation of this possibility: of caring, self-denying, human beings, who live for others.

John Houghton¹⁶ believes that the practical problems of stewardship of the earth are beset by problems of human selfishness and greed which lead to overexploitation of the earth's resources, and by human impotence - we know what to do, but lack the will to do it. This is a spiritual problem. Houghton warns that:

we can see only too well the results of the use of technology to further uncontrolled and unbalanced exploitation. And all of us ... know only too well how often our attempts to solve one environmental problem create other problems we had failed to identify.¹⁷

6. Conclusion:

We look for a theology of energy and find that it is part of the whole doctrine of creation. The land and its resources belong to God and not to human beings. God is revealed as a God of order, power, and

faithfulness, and God is involved in his creation. Human beings are invited by the creator to be co-creators, taking part with God in the care and sharing out of the riches of the world.

Covenant with its themes of relationship, justice and sin, becomes the key underlying principle. God, the creator, draws us into a covenant relationship with himself, which involves us in the responsible and accountable stewardship of creation.

This forms the key principle, which should guide our use of energy sources, and their long-term as well as short-term effects on the earth and its people.

Christians must learn to think and act ecologically; repent of extravagance, pollution and wanton destruction; and recognise that human beings find it easier to subdue the earth than they do to subdue themselves. Christians face the task of articulating the Gospel with relevance; to speak prophetically and relevantly to the environmental and social issues of our day; and rediscover an holistic doctrine of creation. The native American Cree people have a saying:

Only when the last tree has been cut, the last river poisoned, and the last fish caught, only then you will realise that one cannot eat money.¹⁸ **bmfj**

¹ A substantial portion of this paper is available on CD-ROM from the *Methodist Church Energy Pack* © 2003, Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, and used here by permission of Methodist Publishing House.

² Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) p.73

³ Howard Snyder, *Earth Currents - the Struggle for the World's Soul* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995) p.242

⁴ Performance and Innovation Unit, *The Energy Review* (Cabinet Office, Crown Copyright, 2002)

⁵ *The Energy Review*, p. 52

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Energy Futures Task Force, *Energy for Tomorrow: Powering the 21st Century* (DTI, 2001) p.6

⁸ *The Energy Review*, p.11

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *The Energy Review*, p.104

¹¹ Robin Attfield, *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects* (Aldershot, Avebury, 1994) pp.225f

¹² Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation. An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (Gifford Lectures 1984-1985) (SCM, 1985) p.13

¹³ Margot Kassmann, *Covenant, Praise and Justice in David Hallam* (Editor), *Ecology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva, WCC and Maryknoll, Orbis, 1994) p.29

¹⁴ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.23

¹⁵ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.28

¹⁶ John Houghton, *Christians and the Environment: Our Opportunities and Responsibilities* (Science & Christian Belief, Vol 9, No 2, pp. 101-111, 1997)

¹⁷ Houghton, *Christians and the Environment*, p.109

¹⁸ Margot Kassmann, *Covenant, Praise and Justice in Creation in David Hallman*, op.cit. p.49

To know *about* the world is to know it simply as a problem we can solve or as a material we can master. But this is only a limited way of knowing, a way which is useful and necessary up to a point but which can become destructive and death-dealing when our desire to master and exploit the world we live in gets out of hand. We see this very clearly in the dangers which confront our living environment.

To know the world as the poet, or the person who prays, knows it is to know it primarily as a mystery into which we enter; a mystery which is not closed but open to us and which summons us to ever deeper knowledge and understanding.

A M Allchin "God's Presence makes the World" DLT 1997

God-talk and *The Matrix*

With the third film in the *Matrix* trilogy soon to be released, **Terry Mattingly** draws out some themes that reveal a worldview blended from gnostic myth and twenty-first century sci-fi.

The words of Scripture are clear - everything changes when someone is born again.

"Before his first or physical birth man was in the world of the matrix. He had no knowledge of this world; his eyes could not see; his ears could not hear. When he was born from the world of the matrix, he beheld another world," wrote Abdul Baha, son of the Baha'i prophet Baha'ullah, nearly a century ago. Truth is, "the majority of people are captives in the matrix of nature, submerged in the sea of materiality." When freed they gain a "transcendent power" and ascend to a higher kingdom. Perhaps even to Zion.

Wait a minute. Does this mean that millions of moviegoers lining up at 8,400-plus theatres to see *The Matrix Reloaded* will witness the Baha'i version of a Billy Graham movie? Or is this trilogy a door into a kung fu vigilante Buddhism? Or is it some kind of neo-Chnstian parable?

The World Wide Web is jammed with sites offering precisely that spin. Isn't Keanu Reeves playing a super-hacker called Neo, a messiah whose coming was foreseen by the prophets, a Christ figure that is reborn, baptized, murdered and resurrected? Isn't his real name Thomas Anderson (Greek "andras" for man, thus "son of man")? Doesn't a character named Trinity save him?

Acolytes have compiled pages of similar references. Isn't Neo's teacher Morpheus a John the Baptist figure? Why is their ship called the Nebuchadnezzar? And it's a "Mark III, no. 11." Perhaps that is Mark

3:11, which says of Jesus: "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'"

There will be plenty of **fresh clues** in *The Matrix Reloaded* and the upcoming *The Matrix Revolutions*. When it comes to spiritual goodies, this franchise that critics call "the R-rated Star Wars" has something to intrigue or infuriate everyone -from Hollywood to the Bible belt.

No one questions the impact of *The Matrix*, which grossed \$170 million in the United States, \$460 million worldwide and influenced countless movies, computer games, music videos and commercials. But the devotion of its true believers is revealed in another statistic. It was the first DVD to sell more than 1 million copies.

Meanwhile, Andy and Larry Wachowski have religiously avoided doing interviews that might dilute the mystery surrounding their movie. But a fan in a Warner Home Video online chat session did manage to ask: "Your movie has many and varied connections to myths and philosophies, Judeo-Chnstian, Egyptian, Arthurian and Platonic, just to name those I've noticed. How much of that was intentional?" To which the brothers replied: "All of it."

While calling their beliefs "nondenominational," they did confirm that Buddhism plays a major role in *The Matrix*. When asked if their work was shaped by the ancient Christian heresy called Gnosticism, they cryptically replied: "Do you consider that to be a good thing?" While the first film draws images and

details from many conflicting traditions, its worldview is deeply rooted in Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Gnosticism, according to Frances Flannery-Dailey of Hendrix College and Rachel Wagner of the University of Iowa. Clearly, the big idea is that humanity's main problem is that it is "sleeping in ignorance in a dreamworld" and the solution is "waking to knowledge and enlightenment."

Writing in *The Journal of Religion and Film*, they note that the Gnostic messiah brings salvation through a secret truth that lets believers wake up and escape the shabby reality that surrounds them. Through training in the discipline of "stillness," this saviour learns that **what appears to be the real world is an illusion** he can manipulate with his will. It's a gospel of esoteric knowledge, not repentance and grace.

But Wagner and Flannery-Dailey ask: Where are the Gnostic gods in *The Matrix*?

"Divinity may ... play a role in Neo's past incarnation and his coming again as the One. If, however, there is some implied divinity in the film, it remains transcendent, like the divinity of the ineffable, invisible supreme god of Gnosticism, except where it is immanent in the form of the divine spark in humans."

God-talk after *The Matrix*

Predicting the future is dangerous, especially when a would-be prophet puts her thoughts in writing. But that's what author Phyllis Tickle did two decades ago when she wrote. "Books are about to become the portable pastors of America." That turned out to be true. Now, in light of *The Matrix*, she is updating that prophecy about how Americans talk about faith.

It helps to flashback to a statistical earthquake that rattled the book business.

In 1992 the company that dominates sales to libraries saw a stunning 92 percent rise in its religious trade. Then in 1994 religious sales by the giant Ingram Book Group soared 246 percent. In a few years this niche grew 500 percent, said Tickle, who has covered this trend for *Publishers Weekly* and in several of her two-dozen books.

The growth "was malignant," she said. "Bookstore owners kept telling me people would vanish into that back corner where the religious shelves were and stay for hours. When they did that, you just knew they should have been going to see their pastors. But they weren't doing that."

These seekers didn't buy into doctrines and denominations. They didn't want "theology". They wanted **new ideas, images and spiritual stories**. They wanted what Tickle began calling "God-talk" and millions started finding it with the help of cappuccino and Oprah.

And in 1999 everything changed again. "When *The Matrix* came out, it became the best treatise on God-talk that has ever been made," said Tickle. "It could not have been done with a book. It could not have been done with words. ... The primacy of place in creative, cutting-edge God-talk has shifted from non-fiction in the 1980s to fiction in the 1990s and now it is shifting again to the world of the visual, especially to the kinds of myths and stories we see in movies such as *The Matrix*. We're talking about **the manipulation of theological fantasies** and this is a **natural fit for visual media**."

"Theology," she said, is found in the world of doctrine, history, academic credentials and ecclesiastical authority. But "God-talk" thrives far from most pulpits. Its standards are flexible, evolving, user-defined and rooted in small communities. This is a true "democratization of

together, is that we can learn from them how to be **learners**. To start with, they like asking questions. Christ as a child is our model here 'sitting among the teachers, listening to them and **asking them questions**.' (Luke 2:47) This brings us again to Christ's interactive style of preaching. He so often teaches by asking or answering questions. This is good educational practice. Our young people will be used to it in school. Yet so often, the 'church service' is a performance.

Incidentally, Jesus' practice may have been common in synagogues of his day. E. P. Sanders argues that archaeological evidence from 'the three surviving first-century Palestinian synagogues' indicates that the 'seating plan ... encourages brief comments or questions from the congregation' (i.e. adult males!).

Children as models for discipleship also remind us that we all need to **grow**. Even though he was so precocious at his first visit to the Temple (after infancy), Jesus still '**grew in wisdom and stature**' (Luke 2:52). How much more do we need to grow spiritually, all of us. Because we often see an all-age service as an evangelistic opportunity (as I confess I have tended to do) we can concentrate on getting people from 'unsaved' to 'saved'. Yet the unsaved may first need to be moved from 'enemies of truth' to 'not far from the kingdom', while those saved still need to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18). Recalling the picture of the Church as 'a band of people, all on a shared journey', should we not see each service as an

opportunity for each of us to travel a little further after Christ? **bmj**

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The author would be glad to hear from any exploring similar pathways, at r.allaway@bigfoot.com.

Lord grant us to be a people
 where children are seen as signs of your kingdom
 where noble ideals are fostered in the days of youth
 where faithfulness is encouraged among adults and
 where the wisdom of long years is cherished.

from "Prayers for the Lord's Day: Hope for Exiles"
 James S Lowry, Geneva Press Kentucky 2002

Richard Baxter – Catechising today

Jim Binney, Kings Heath, Birmingham, considers that today's pastor may learn much from the heritage of Richard Baxter, the Puritan pastor-teacher who ministered with great effectiveness in Kidderminster during the middle years of the 17th Century.

House groups meeting to discuss the sermon, pastoral visiting with purpose, evangelistic writings alongside social action, ministers meeting from different churches for mutual support... There is a contemporary flavour to this approach to ministry, which outlasts many of the more dated particulars in the work of Richard Baxter (1615-91). Two aspects of his ministry, I believe, are particularly worth exploring again in the present day: the place of catechising and the value of mentoring. Here, we will look at the place of catechising.

Baxter's Pattern

Although a great preacher, Richard Baxter is best known for his pastoral work, and the catechetical system through which many were enabled to turn to God.

Every week Baxter and his assistant, between them, met with fourteen families to systematically catechise or instruct them in the fundamental teaching of the Scriptures. Each family was given a copy of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and urged to 'read, mark and learn'. After six weeks they would be visited and questioned by Baxter or his assistant, taking special care 'to deal with every one'. Their aim was to meet with each of the eight hundred or so families in the parish every year.¹ This was carefully planned and carried out to the letter. In *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) Baxter tells us that he took

'a catalogue of all the persons in the parish... the clerk goeth a week before, to every family, to tell them what day to come, and at what hour, (one family

at eight o'clock the next at nine, and the next at ten etc)... I am forced by number to deal with a whole family at once; but ordinarily I admit not any of another family to be present.'²

Few families refused to come to such a meeting, and Baxter records their fruitfulness, that 'few families went from me without some tears, or seemingly serious promise of a Godly life.'³

What he is describing and commending is the practice of systematically interviewing families for the purpose of personal spiritual dealing, in which

'I first heard them recite the words of the catechism, and then examined them about the sense, and lastly urged them with all possible engaging reason and vehemently to answerable affection and practice. I spent about an hour with a family'.⁴

He was taken aback by the lack of understanding derived from clear sermons, compared to the understanding which came from instruction in small family groups, and his testimony to the value of such practice is emphatic –

'I find that we never took the best course for demolishing the kingdom of darkness, till now... I find more outward signs of success with most... than all my public preaching to them.'⁵

Value for today?

The method of instructing and testing the understanding of Christian believers by means of question and answer has been

used over the centuries, but has it anything to offer us of value today? Back in 1962, catechising was described as 'a forgotten practice'⁶ and this may still hold true.

However, the popularity and effectiveness *Alpha* and *Emmaus* courses, together with the growing impact of Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*⁷, suggest a desire for some form of catechising. The plethora of 'How to Do It' books in High Street bookshops may also be evidence of this in secular society. Moreover, the current 'thinness' of understanding about Christian Faith amongst many enquirers and believers demands that we take more seriously the need for educating our people in the essentials of 'the Faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' [Jude 3]. If we do not fill this void, others will. G K Chesterton was surely correct when he observed that, 'When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.'⁸ One church member recently reflected how helpful he had found one particular book. It turned out to be New Age and full of weird and wonderful ideas couched in 'Christian language'. An intelligent man, and a Christian of some years standing, he happily absorbed New Age teaching without apparently realising it. He is not alone. Reflecting on thirty-four years of experience in Christian Ministry I would have to say that understanding concerning the Christian Faith, amongst both unbelievers and believers, is as low as I have ever known it.

I am not suggesting that we reintroduce the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and do things just as Baxter did in Kidderminster, but I am suggesting that in principle catechising has value, and that the time is ripe for it to be reintroduced in our churches in some form. I do not wish to return to the idea of educating people only by presenting them with systematic theology as propositional truth, but neither *Baptist Ministers' Journal* October 2003

am I happy with the idea of just allowing people to discover truth for themselves through personal reflection. Both these ideas have their strengths, but also their weaknesses. When I became a Christian in the early 1960's education, both in church and at school, was essentially through the presentation of propositional truth: listening to the teacher, learning by heart what was taught, reproducing it verbatim afterwards. It did not always, however, involve absorbing truth. Educational methodology has evolved considerably since then and today it is widely accepted that students (particularly adults) learn better through experienced-based learning and reflection.⁹ Learning purely through personal experience and reflection has its drawbacks, however, if it does not also draw on essential truth. This is particularly so when it comes to Christian truth. In any given situation we need to bring relevant theological understanding to that situation but also reflect on that theology to see how it fits/works.

A new Christian and her agnostic husband attend church regularly. Under the influence of fundamentalist Christians, she 'learns' the propositional truth "the head of woman is man" (1 Cor 11.3) and that she should be subservient to her husband's wishes in order to bring peace to a sometimes difficult home. Soon it is evident that her husband is taking advantage of her and things become worse. Eventually, in conversation with her Pastor the truth of the Scriptures is understood in a more "whole" way.

Basic essentials

What are the 'essentials' at the heart of any modern day catechism? Baxter used the latest Reformed Study Guide of his day, *The Shorter Westminster Catechism*.¹⁰ He tells us elsewhere, however, he would have been happy to take 'the Creed, Lord's Prayer and Decalogue'¹¹ We know there must be conversation between

Gospel, Tradition, and Culture, but Baxter's position appears to be a good place to start.

As Baptists, what core might we use as the basis of an up-to-date catechizing programme? We can, of course, draw from elsewhere, and many do. *Alpha*, however, is designed as an evangelistic rather than catechetical tool. *Emmaus* is essentially designed for use in Anglican Churches and therefore lacks any Baptist Distinctive. We are currently working along *Purpose Driven Church* lines, with substantial re-writing of the four courses to make them our own. Could Paul Beasley-Murray's *Radical Believers* be a possible alternative basis?

If it was possible for an Assembly of Divines to draw up the *Westminster Confession* in the mid 17th Century, surely it should not be impossible for a group of 'Baptist Divines' to get together and put together a Baptist Catechism and course

which takes the best of the rest whilst at the same time preserving those 'Baptist distinctives' that we may be in danger of losing.

The age of the 'anti-expert'

Not everyone agrees with the need for Creeds or Catechisms, but across a range of outlooks there is a perception that we need *something*. John J Vincent, a Methodist Industrial Missioner, advocated 'a radical theology based on discipleship to Jesus, a new systematic based on faithful practice. We do not need creeds, but 'rules for the road', for those who wish to be disciples to the ongoing, emerging God incarnate in the Christ today.'¹² In my pastoral experience, however, I would say that people need not just rules of the road, but a clearer grasp of the map for the journey. The challenge is how to provide that in an 'anti-expert' culture. Many want to learn but are reluctant to come to a 'teacher' to be taught, preferring to try and

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find out from each other. They do not want to be 'told' by those they perceive to be 'experts'.

Mary has received help and support through the church, leading to a recommitment of her life to Christ and growing participation in the life of the church. But her attendance has become less regular and she now gets most of her instruction from popular Christian paperbacks or from talking with certain other Christians. Believing that 'the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you ... as his anointing teaches you about all things' [1 John 2:27], she is spending a lot of time 'mentoring' other weak and needy people in the fellowship and her attitude is beginning to have a detrimental effect on the wider church fellowship.

I have had to learn not to take the Mary's of this world personally (I am not the only 'expert' who is sidelined), but accept the reality ... and find other ways of working with this particular phenomenon. I have had to learn to be Eugene Peterson's 'Subversive Pastor'.¹³ I do this, not to retain my position as Pastor-Teacher, but because I love and care about these people and recognise that, more often than not, left to their own devices the situation degenerates into 'the blind leading the blind' and keen but naïve people end up in a mess.

One of the ways in which we can be subversive is to use the desire people have today to learn from one another, to learn together, whilst at the same time subtly directing them from the sidelines. This needs to be the case with the catechetical courses we employ within our churches, selecting the right course and teaching methods for our people.¹⁴

Measuring progress and taking courage

Within any system of catechising there has to be a way in which people are tested/examined to ensure that they are genuinely benefiting and growing. Commitment to the process may be sought through a covenant agreement. And those who oversee the pastoral care of the church should commit themselves to 'pastoral visiting with attitude', wherever possible using pastoral visits specifically to enquire into the spiritual health and progress of the person being visited, and ensuring that all members of the church and congregation have a pastoral visit in the course of the year especially designated for this purpose. These two aspects were essential in the effectiveness and success of Baxter's ministry in Kidderminster.

By his own confession, Baxter was frightened to implement his system of catechising within his own church for a long time. He was very apprehensive about its success, fearing that the difficulties were too great and that it would be scorned. He was already involved in so many tasks that he could not see where he could find the time or strength for this added responsibility.

It will be a struggle for many of us in pastoral charge to implement a modern equivalent. It will not be easy for us to change our own approach, and work to change the approach of our people. It will not be easy for our people to accept the necessary changes required. But just as the struggle was ultimately worthwhile for Baxter, and brought great blessing to the work in Kidderminster, so it will be worth the struggle for us. Orme pointed out in 1830 that Baxter did not have superior talents to others, he simply used what he had to the best advantage - 'there is nothing in Baxter but what the grace and power of God can do for others'.¹⁵ **bmj**

This article is a shortened version of a paper given at the consultation in August 2003, "Baptists doing Theology in Context". The full version will eventually be available on the website www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/theology-in-context. It represents work in progress, and the author would be glad to hear from those who would like to discuss these issues further. (jimbinney@aol.com)

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⁸ Quoted in various places on the GK Chesterton sites on the internet

⁹ See Mallison, John, *Mentoring to Develop Disciples & Leaders* (Scripture Union, Lidcombe, 1998) pp.104ff.

¹⁰ A series of 107 questions and answers drawn up in 1648 and based upon the teaching contained in the *Westminster Confession* and *Larger Westminster Catechism* drawn up by the Assembly of Divines sitting at Westminster (1642-1647)

¹¹ Baxter, *Reliquiae*, Pt.I, p.132, para.213.27

¹² Quoted in the *Christian Quotation Collection* (Lion, London, 1997) p.325

¹³ See Peterson Eugene H, *The Contemplative*

Pastor (Eerdman's, Grand Rapids, 1989), pp.27-37.

¹⁴ We have opted to use the four *Purpose Driven Church* courses, reflecting together in small groups on the theological principles contained within the courses. *Purpose Driven Church* ideas suit us because they clearly identify the five main purposes of the church and provide a method of encouraging people to move from the community to the very core of the church, and then back out again into the community as people with a mission. The original courses were very much on a propositional truth basis but we have substantially rewritten them to retain the purpose of each course whilst changing the teaching method to a mixture of propositional truth and reflective learning. Members of church and congregation are encouraged to sign up for each course in turn, and each is explored in small discussion groups. Obviously much depends upon the leaders of the groups being not only capable people, but accepted by the groups because they come from within the groups themselves. This is what gives this kind of teaching validity today, and promotes mutuality, inter-dependence and collective discipleship.

¹⁵ Orme, *Works*, p.167

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Book Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes by **Walter Brueggemann**. Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. xiv + 256pp. £25 ISBN 0-664-22231-5 (paperback).

That the author is Walter Brueggemann will be enough recommendation for those of us always stimulated by the scholarship and penetrating style of Columbia Theological Seminary's Professor of Old Testament. Here are 105 Old Testament themes and subjects arranged alphabetically in what at first looks like a theological dictionary. It begins with "(The) Ancestors" and ends with "YHWH", by way of "Blessing", "Death", "Image of God", "Land", "Resurrection", "Samaritans", "Vengeance", "Worship" and much else besides. Dive in at almost any point and readers will soon find themselves following up a whole variety of cross-references and personal lines of interest.

About a quarter of the entries are what Brueggemann calls "big ticket items" and are therefore what you would expect in a list of Old Testament themes - Covenant, Holiness, Messiah, Remnant, Sacrifice, Torah and the like. The rest are presumably there because they mattered to the author, but most of us will be very content with the menu. With each topic Brueggemann first outlines the consensus position in current scholarship (when possible!), then what is at issue in "the interpretative question" pertaining to the entry and finally offers an indication of how that might matter to us as Christians. Thus, on the subject of "Neighbour", we are reminded that the interpretive process for both Judaism and Christianity "is the struggle to enlarge the circle of neighbourliness", a process that is "keenly

disputatious in contemporary Christian interpretation." Like the Galatians before us, we find it hard to agree about the criteria for acceptance within the Church of Christ!

Brueggemann's stated hope is that his book will be of value to pastors and "thoughtful lay persons"; I think that hope is realised. Certainly those preparing sermons regularly will find this a handy reference providing fresh lines of approach to familiar themes.

Ken Stewart, Horfield, Bristol.

Enacting the Word. Using Drama in Preaching. **James O Chatham**. Westminster John Knox. £6.99. ISBN: 0664225705

This little book briefly introduces the idea of dramatic sermons, but is mostly given over to seven scripts that potentially could be lifted and tried in your services with a few extra suggestions of material thrown in. It covers a range of biblical material, stories and themes, like Jonah and Rahab, persistence in prayer and what it means to be called.

Each one uses a range of musicians, actors, readers, with the preacher to convey story and message.

Many question the viability of the sermon, in the traditional sense, as a means of communicating in contemporary worship. So I was intrigued by the concept of an interactive style of presenting the gospel, and the possibilities for it becoming more of a community act of listening to the Word. Not averse to trying creative and visual ways of working, I began with anticipation.

It was disappointing then that none of the scripts made me want to use them. They lacked depth and needed a fair bit of adapting for this side of the Atlantic. There was very little challenge and application. In fact, none of them struck me as dramatic 'sermons'. The bits the preachers had to say didn't seem to explain or enhance the drama, and some of the dramatic bits I didn't understand the point of using. None of them amused me, or particularly captured my imagination, and I don't even feel like I want to write my own.

It's acknowledged that to do things this way would be time consuming, but it's not time I recommend spending on this material.

Rachel Haig, Horfield, Bristol.

The Daily Telegraph Guide to Christian Marriage. **Adrian Thatcher**. Continuum. £10.99 2003

If you are anywhere to the left of Right, the *Daily Telegraph* guide to anything might not resonate for you. That would be a pity in this case. The guide is a useful resource, with concise reflections upon ever-relevant issues for pastors.

Did you know that the likely age of men marrying for the first time is 30.5 years and for women 28.2 years? Or that just under 50% of couples getting married for the first time chooses a religious ceremony?

There are more interesting stats plus loads of referenced websites upon a whole range of issues to do with marriage and weddings. For example, www.cofe.anglican.org where can be found the *Common Worship* marriage service. This forms a base text for much of the book's discussion. Other sites cover marriage preparation and ceremonies of all shapes and sorts. Also included are dates when the author accessed these sites, so

you can see if anything's changed.

C of E and RC matters naturally get a lot of coverage. Even the Buddhists and Quakers are mentioned but not Baptists specifically. Chapters include second marriages, and pre-marital sex and cohabiting, issues upon which ministers and churches need to have some clarity as to their policies.

'Why does marriage matter?' asks the author. Exploring the meaning of marriage for those involved, there is a remarkable insight about the marriage relationship as witness. Thatcher speaks of 'circles of love' and marriage 'as a special channel for God's grace to flow into the world.' Wow! Ever thought of your marriage in these terms?

You may – or may not – balk at reading the *Telegraph* but do read this book. It is practical and affirming. You will not always agree with what's said but it is worth reflection. And it would prove worthwhile as suggested reading for any couple in your church, married or otherwise, who want to get more serious about their relationship.

Charles Rutter

Ministry in the Countryside A Model for the Future (Revised and Expanded) **Andrew Bowden**. Continuum 2003. xviii + 249 pp £14.99 ISBN 0-8264-6765-2

This is a revision of a book formerly published in 1994, which had emerged from the earlier report *Faith in the Countryside*, with some statistical updating and a new introduction. It reflects some valuable insights into the nature and context of rural life but is a book better borrowed than bought.

The term 'Church' is used with reference to the Church of England, and the author speaks from an Anglican

perspective. The latter is not of itself is not a criticism, but it would have been better to have had this acknowledged more clearly in title and 'cover blurb'.

Behind a question asking what lessons can be learnt from the decline of the Free Churches in rural areas, there is a recognition of at least some Anglican success in 'holding the fort'. But the grounds for comparison are specious. The fact that a church is still open is not necessarily to say that it has declined 'less' than its neighbours of other denominations, simply that the funding works differently. This book would benefit from a deeper assessment of what appears to be the mutual inability of both Anglican and Free Churches to put education, resources and energy into truly ecumenical churches in rural areas. Doubtless this would shame us all. But 'The Ecumenical Dimension' is not addressed until Chapter 12 of seventeen chapters.

There are useful elements in this book – not least the connection between 'earth' and 'people' in God's providential care and an increasing turn to the significance of the local congregation in ministry without diminishing the sense of the Church's Catholic nature. There are also some unexpected gems in Chapter 12 "The role of the stipendiary".

Hazel Sherman. Brecon.

Let Us Pray, **Martha Gilliss** (Ed), Geneva Press, ISBN 0-664-50173-7, 157 pp, pb. £9.99.

If your reaction is, "What, another book of prayers?" N. Graham Standish says in the foreword that each generation requires prayers that articulate human need in the idiom of the day. The prayers in the book are all by current Presbyterian pastors and theologians. The language used is conversational and generally informal, and

the prayers offered cover a variety of approaches and themes.

The book is arranged according to the liturgical year, and the prayers from Advent to Pentecost, including Ordinary Time, are arranged according to the Order of Service followed by the Presbyterian Church in the USA. An additional section includes prayers for special occasions during Ordinary Time (Baptism, Lord's Supper, Marriage etc.).

The variety in the prayers reflects the diversity of their authors. Some allow for congregational response and participation. There is a good selection of short prayers, especially for use at the Lord's Supper, which could easily be shared among a number of different people. Of these, I commend those by Mark H. Langfried. Other prayers include the use of different voices, again, good for congregational participation.

It is inevitable that the language of all the prayers will not suit everyone. I found some of the prayers over long, excessively wordy, and in some cases used vocabulary outside of the experience of many congregations. Some prayers are arranged as passages of prose, making them difficult to read aloud. I adapted some of these for use, by rearranging the lines to include logical breaks in text. Another drawback is that, although many of the prayers include congregational responses, to use them would require they be reproduced, and the book requires copyright permission to do so.

A good proportion of the prayers do voice human need in the idiom of today, even allowing for transatlantic differences. I believe the book to be a useful addition to one's collection of prayer books if used creatively and with care.

Kath Lawson, Todmorden,
West Yorkshire.