Issue 26
December 2011
Price $5

CROSS Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

Contents

CROSS Purposes

Another year draws to a close and to round it off, another issue of *Cross Purposes*.

This issue's *In Service* is from Alison Whish, Presbytery Minister for Leadership Development in Tasmania (characteristically, the Tasmanian allocation of Presbytery roles is not *quite* the same as in the Presbyteries north of the Strait!). Alison considers the context of her ministry as a frontier, anticipating what the wider Uniting Church may be like in years to come.

The next three contributions continue our recent credal theme, this time looking at the incarnation. Garry Deverell's Christmas sermon situates the nativity readings in their context among oppressed peoples crying for liberation, and argues that in our own time too, we must read these as texts of resistance if we are to appreciate their full force.

Sean Winter considers the credal affirmations that Jesus is the Son of God, enfleshed and made man. Acknowledging the gender exclusivity of the terms "fatherhood" and "sonship", he gives a reading of this language emphasizing the particularity of concrete, worldly life as the theatre for revealing God's glory.

Colin Honey takes a different approach to the statement "I believe in Jesus Christ", distinguishing between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Faith", and the different sorts of knowledge that are appropriate to each.

Finally, Bruce Barber offers an attempt to clear up some popular category confusions in anticipation of the forthcoming World Atheist Convention, billed as "A Celebration of Reason", to be held in Melbourne next April. Bruce critiques the assumptions behind the familiar opposition of "faith" to "reason", tracing the history of this dichotomy in the Enlightenment and earlier, and pleading for a genuinely Christian alternative of the reconciliation of the mind.

Published by the Hawthorn Parish, Uniting Church in Australia

Editors:
Garry Deverell
Craig Thompson
Martin Wright

Letters to the Editor are invited to:

editors@cp.unitingchurch.org.au

or,

Cross Purposes
c/- 81 Oxley Road
Hawthorn 3122

Editorial deadline for Issue 27:
24 February 2012

Subscriptions from $20 pa (including postage)

Discounts for bulk subscriptions available on enquiry

Advertising space available from $15

Cross Purposes can be accessed online at cp.unitingchurch.org.au (electronic publication is delayed) and may be freely reproduced with acknowledgement

Letters

Life in the Spirit

I was very interested to read the articles on spirituality by Joan Wright Howie (*CP* 24) and Adam McIntosh (*CP* 25), and thank them both for providing much food for thought, and for our weekly theological discussion group.

The definition of Christian spirituality for Paul is "life in the Spirit", where the body and the spirit are not separated. Joan's article on "Popular Belief in Spirit and Christian Spirituality" presupposes a separation of body and spirit, where the human and divine are seeking to reunite (which would be a common understanding of what spirituality is in our culture).

I strongly agreed with Adam that there is an "elephant in the room of this discussion". I agree with him that we have a strong tendency to allow (to even desire) that the culture set the agenda for who God is, what the church is to be, and what spirituality is. This may be due to us wanting the church to have the cultural status and relevance back that it once enjoyed. We tend to want to ask: what does the world want the church to be, and what sort of spirituality is the world seeking, rather than who is the God who gives the church her being and mission and therefore, what is this church and what spirituality do we offer.

The Christ event, as Paul argues, completely transforms our understanding of how we understand the terms life and spirit, or body and spirit, or human and divine. For Paul, life is "life in the Spirit", not a life that is separate from the spirit and has to search for the spirit with which to reunite or rebind.

I would like to challenge the understanding that most people are hungering for a spirituality (Christian or other) in our Australian context. If so, I don't seem to bump into these masses, although certainly there are individuals who are, especially at crisis points in their lives. A reading of Genesis 3 notes that human beings as a whole don't need or desire a god (for they often feel they are already all-powerful, all-knowing, all-performing, and all-having especially in this Western culture). Paul says in Romans, all have fallen short of the glory of God.

What the world needs (not wants) is a spirituality that begins with the body of Christ that has reunited human and divine. This would then be a Christian spirituality that is not offered as a work, but a gift. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done", says the woman at the well in John 4. Note that the invitation is not come and find this God and get to know her more (which is how our culture defines spirituality). This God is already fully present in our life and in the life of the world, and already fully knows who we are. This is what the body of Christ is called to offer each week in Word and Sacrament in every place; a reminder of what it means to be human in the Spirit and the calling to live this out in the world, that others may see and hear and respond. This is the good news.

Claire Tanner

in service

Alison Whish

Leadership on the Frontier

With a provocative sermon on the feeding stories in John 6 reminding me that God provides in abundance still ringing in my ears,[1] I returned from holidays and made the move across Bass Strait to Tasmania just over three years ago. In the midst of the muddle of moving boxes I realised that this was now my third state in six years. For someone who needs networks to help in making sense of her world, this was a significant challenge. Yet again, I was having to start "all over" again. This really hit home when the local arrangements for accommodation away from home were explained as "bunking in with family and friends". All mine felt like they were somewhere other than Tasmania.

The placement began with a live-in Presbytery gathering over the weekend that concluded with my induction service. There is nothing quite like eating and sleeping with your new Presbytery for forty-eight hours as a way to begin! It meant that I met about sixty Presbytery members within my first two days.

The primary task of the placement is described as equipping church leaders, both lay and ordained, with skills for ministry and to enable new ways of being church. This Presbytery placement relates to the Mission and Education network, but has been shaped by the needs of the Presbytery and so is somewhat different to the Victorian roles.

Learning to read and understand the context of Tasmania has been important. For example, with no Uniting Church theological college within Tasmania, people undertaking various forms of study have to undertake distance education or now, online classes. Travelling to Melbourne to participate in events at the Centre for Theology and Ministry is costly and for many Tasmanians, well outside their comfort zone. The web of learning therefore needs strong local expression here.

The small numbers and scattered geography are challenges when it comes to supporting people undertaking Lay Preacher training, working on a Period of Discernment or participating in a transition to ordination program with specific study requirements.

I have responsibility for leadership development across the Presbytery. In functional terms that means ensuring continuing education opportunities

[1] Preached in Dunblane Cathedral by Bishop John Crook, retired Episcopal Church of Scotland Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness, at an evening service during an RSCM Singing Break.

are available for ministry workers and others who offer leadership, such as Lay Preachers, and those who offer lay leadership more informally. Support of people undertaking study on various pathways, people undertaking a Period of Discernment, Lay Preacher candidates, transition to ordination programmes, Pastors, Code of Ethics sessions, and supervision for ministry workers all falls in my direction. Alongside that are the community-specific requests for particular education, and specific projects identified in the Presbytery priorities each year. For example, pastoral care and consensus decision making have been requested this year, and I have begun working with a couple of particular clusters of Congregations to support renewal and restructuring of leadership arrangements.

During the winter, with the help of the Lay Leadership Educator and former ELM staff from NSW, two *Understanding Sacraments in the Uniting Church* courses were held. These offered continuing education opportunities for some of the thirty-plus people who have permission to preside at the sacraments, and initial preparation for some stepping into that role. A number of other people attended simply out of interest which was wonderful. I still marvel at the diversity of experience we found in those groups, from someone who had held a senior academic position to people who had left school at the age of fourteen.

I quickly learned that taking note of context was vitally important in understanding how to work in this role across the island. In terms of the church, we are small. There are some 57 congregations, with about twenty ministry workers in direct relationship with some of those congregations. There is a large church school and a small UnitingCare agency as well as a number of Uniting Aged Care sites. Our two biggest congregations would have eighty to ninety people worshipping Sunday by Sunday. It is a major event if we gather thirty to participate in an educational event. If that rises to fifty, as it did for the Justice and International Mission Convention we held here in April, then everyone is astonished. Yet recently, with Unite Tasmania, a series of regional Presbytery gatherings, we estimate about 700+ members shared in three joint regional worship services held on three Sundays during August and September.

In reflecting on the situation in Tasmania, I think I have found a frontier. I suspect what we are experiencing here, now, is simply a mirror of what other parts of the Uniting Church will encounter in a few more years. Classic Uniting Church polity is too people-rich for us to sustain here in the way it was envisaged at the time of union. We need to find more relevant and effective ways of organizing and supporting each other.

In many ways I feel the pressure and frustration of where the church is located at present, between the institutional nature of Christendom and the new that we are being led into. Much of my time is taken up with activities that are about maintaining the institution, such as ensuring people have supervisors

and supporting people training for existing forms of ministry such as lay preaching. Yet there is a clear recognition from some small parts of the church in Tasmania that we need to die to much of what has been so that God can do a new thing with God's people on the Apple Isle.

After three years in the placement these are the sorts of things I wonder about:

- Our worship life—People are starving to death and not going anywhere. Much energy is being used to maintain a service of worship of a "cathedral" style when there are only fifteen to twenty people gathered. Leadership is stretched, trying to do what they can, often with very little preparation for preaching, leading worship or even testifying to their own faith. Almost anyone to fill the plan will do. What form of worship will nurture people, enable us to glimpse God and explore the mystery of faith, yet still leave energy for being disciples in our local context? Is smaller, more intimate, home-based worship a more enriching way for small scattered groups to worship? What forms and resources can nurture that different scale and style of worship? How will the sacraments be celebrated? If we withdraw to homes, it deals with the delayed maintenance bill on our forty heritage listed churches and eleven heritage listed cemeteries, but how can the "public" nature of worship be lived out?
- The struggle of resisting a model of church that is all about "personal chaplaincy" rather than being present as a sign of the love of God in our communities.
- How the faith is being taught—By that I mean taking seriously the reality that we are now entering a time when people have not been well formed in their faith. Coming generations do not always have high biblical literacy nor a good "lay" capacity for theological reflection.
- Infant baptism—Requests have significantly reduced in the past few years. In some ways this is a healthy mark of the separation of church from culture. But it does mean that like the first three centuries, we could expect more adult candidates who have not even got "Christian memory". How will these people be formed in their faith and prepared? How will children be formed in their faith when so many of our communities have only the occasional family present?
- Adult baptisms—Do these need to be celebrated by the Presbytery at some larger gathered service once or twice in the year, preceded by an effective catechetical preparation that takes teaching the faith seriously? A task that is too big for many of our small communities as they are at present.
- Spiritual developmental stage—How can we respectfully and appropriately give our many older members the space to attend to the spiritual development tasks that are appropriate for their stage in the life cycle? I am concerned that because there are not people to hand certain institution-maintaining tasks on to, as there might have been in other

generations, people are feeling the need to carry certain leadership tasks way beyond the time when they would want. The cost of that can manifest in them not having space to attend to spiritual tasks that are important.

Within the Presbytery of Tasmania, the various church communities are recognizing that in contemporary Australia we will be occupying a much more marginal place in our communities. The live question we are all facing at present is how to take up a place in our many communities where we can live out our discipleship in ways suitable to the new contexts. This will need to be done in imaginative and creative ways, without the institutional supports and resources, both human and financial, that we have been accustomed to. What will need to disappear in order for something other to emerge?

I am still considerably exercised by some of our liturgies that remind us that there is no gift without its corresponding service. Or that God provides in abundance as in the feeding stories. Moses dealt with an, at times, querulous bunch as he tried to offer leadership. And then it was Joshua who finally crossed the Jordan with the people. I suspect that when I am eventually called out of this placement, there will be as many questions unanswered and actively being explored in the area of leadership development as there are at present.

Meanwhile if anyone knows whereabouts in the church I have left my magic leadership wand, could they please send it home to me in Tasmania?

Alison Whish is Presbytery Minister: Leadership Development in the Presbytery of Tasmania.

through a glass darkly

Garry Deverell

Christmas—Creating a Body of Resistance

Isaiah 9:2-7 · Titus 2:11-14 · Luke 2:1-14

The stories and readings of Christmas will have little power or consequence unless we understand that the events they describe take place within a particular kind of political reality—worlds dominated by an imperial super-power, a military emperor who can make ordinary people do and say whatever he wants them to do or say. When Isaiah was preaching in Jerusalem at the end of the eighth century BC, that power was the king of Assyria, whose empire stretched from India to Egypt. The darkness of his harsh and oppressive rule extended even into the daily lives of the people of Israel, whose labour and produce was heavily taxed to enrich the Emperor and support his expansionist policies. In this environment, the power of the local Jewish king was so insignificant that there was really little option for him except to become a local supporter of the Emperor's will. To defy the Emperor would have left Judah open to attack by one of its small neighbours, some other petty king with powerful ambitions. In this environment, "security" and "safety" was guaranteed only by sucking up to the biggest power on earth, the Emperor of Assyria. Yet the situation of the ordinary people could hardly have been described as "safe" or "secure". The Jewish people suffered terribly because there was little practical sense in which they could claim to be free. They belonged to the Emperor of Assyria. The economic and social privileges granted them under the covenant with Yahweh their God were severely curtailed, because the Emperor now claimed to own their bodies, their houses, and all they produced. There was precious little of their lives or their livelihoods that the Emperor could not claim as his own. In the words of Isaiah, they were a people who walked in a very great darkness. They were an oppressed people ruled by the soldiers of a foreign power.

The situation was not all that different when Jesus was born over 700 years later. The global power had changed, certainly. It was now the Romans who ruled the roost. Yet the lives of the Jewish people were much the same. Their political leaders, whether kings or councils, spent most of their time sucking up to the Romans and doing their bidding. That was the way to survive. What that meant for the ordinary folk, the folk who actually produced the food and built the roads and the houses and whatever else, was misery. For again, whoever they were or whatever they

produced ultimately belonged not to themselves, but to the Emperor of Rome. So that while most people could feed themselves, if they worked hard, and while some people could even become quite wealthy if they worked very hard to supply the Romans with what they wanted most, everyone (whether rich or poor) belonged not to themselves or even to God, but to the Emperor. If the Emperor demanded something of you, through the agency of a governor or even a local solider, you had no right to resist. If you valued your life, or the lives of your loved ones, you did as you were told. That is what Luke is trying to tell us with his tale about an imperial command that the whole world should be registered. He is telling us that in the world in which Jesus was born, you did as the Great Power told you. To resist was to die.

Lest we think all of this is ancient history, and that we have somehow transcended such oppression, let me invoke the name of General Augusto Pinochet—until the late 1990s the President of Chile, who died a couple of weeks ago. Chile is a very small country in the grand scheme of things. But he did what the great power in our modern world wanted him to do. He promoted the policies of contemporary neoliberalism. He forced his people to give away any privileges they might enjoy under international human rights or labour agreements in order to turn the country into a quarry to fuel the engine of Western consumerism. He killed and tortured anyone who resisted his policies, and he did so with secret police trained by the American intelligence services—principally the CIA. And all the time he pretended to be a good Catholic. When he was finally excommunicated from the church by the bishops of Chile, he threw some of them into prison, where they joined many other Christians, lay and ordained, who had dared to challenge the power of the state. In the end, Pinochet fell from power because Christians finally found their voices once more, and started to articulate a different vision for Chile. Against the story told by Pinochet—in which every person was required to sacrifice themselves, their families, and their livelihoods for the economic glory and prosperity of the nation—the church posited a counter-story in which the bodies of the people belonged to a God of love who would never force them to do anything against their will, who nevertheless called them to a different kind of prosperity, the prosperity and security that comes when people love one another, and share whatever they have so that the rich may never be too rich and the poor may never be too poor.

So what the promised coming of a Messiah meant for Isaiah's Judah and Joseph and Mary's Jerusalem is exactly the same as it means for us in our contemporary world. It means that God does not surrender the bodies of his people to the oppression and slavery of whatever global power is wanting to have its way with us. It means that just as God took our human flesh to himself in Jesus so that our bodies were no longer simply ours but God's as well,

God continues to take a body to Godself in the church, a social body which God makes for Godself in the conversions wrought through baptism and eucharist. It means that God stands with us and for us against the powers of this world, not in Spirit alone, but also in the body and in bodily practices that make for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. For in Jesus the yoke of the oppressor's power is broken. In Jesus we see a body broken up, tortured, and finally killed by the power of an evil state. Yet. When the powers appear to have his body absolutely within their control—enclosed within the silent tomb of death—at precisely that moment, Jesus breaks free in the power of the resurrection to show that not even coercion and death is finally strong enough to defeat the power of love. For the truth revealed in the resurrection of Jesus is this: that the power of our political overlords is ever only the power we grant them through our fear and our failure to believe that we can be what God has called us to be. If a child born amongst the poorest can one day threaten the power of Empire—not because he is smart or strong, but because he believes absolutely in liberating word of God that stirs within him—then the church, too, can become a community of resistance that threatens the power of Bush, Blair and Howard to enslave us all in the neoliberal lies of our time.

I pray that we, who take the name of Christ to ourselves tonight, may give our bodies not to the state, out of some kind of fear that we shall miss out on the "relaxed and comfortable" life it promises, but to God and to God's mission of love, that the world may find its liberation through the revolutionary giving of Jesus. For in the end, it is only the gift of God, ever given again by his people, that shall save our world from its lies and self-deceptions. It is precisely that radical sharing and giving, that politics of love, which we remember and perform in the eucharist, which we shall now prepare to eat together.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to all God has favoured with his care. In the name of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as in the beginning, so now and for ever. Amen.

Garry Deverell is an editor of *Cross Purposes*. This sermon was preached on Christmas Eve 2006.

credo

Sean Winter

Son of the Father?

> And the Word became flesh, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)
>
> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes". (2 Corinthians 1:19)
>
> One only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life.[1]
>
> That's the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things. There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that.[2]

What are we saying when we confess that we believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God? What truth do the creeds help us to affirm and understand? Or, more directly, what is the point and what difference does it make to speak of Jesus as "son"?

For some, the undeniable fact that the term is gender specific renders it problematic, along with all such "traditional" God-talk. The plea for new ways of talking about God is an understandable and appropriate reaction to a patriarchal culture that employs the terms "father" and "son" and thus envisages God in ways that simply prop up the unequal distribution of power between the sexes ("if God is male, then male is God", as Mary Daly used to say).[3]

The usual response to all of this (from those who understand the critique but want to affirm the importance of the tradition) is to explain that the use of the language of father and son is first and foremost a christological affirmation. What we are saying when we confess Jesus as "son" is something about the nature of the relationship between God and Jesus or, more specifically, about the particular form of address with which Jesus chose to speak to God; a given reality that we cannot change, but in which we are invited to participate.[4] Alternatively, we could (and I believe should) seek to heighten our awareness of the essentially metaphorical nature of all such God-talk. As Barth put it, there is "something like fatherhood and sonship" at work here.[5] If that is true, then one way of demonstrating its truth might be to call God "mother" and even, to push the

[1] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 486.

[2] Robinson, *Gilead*, 6f.

[3] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

[4] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 89-96.

[5] Barth, *CD* I.1.363.

argument to its logical conclusion, to call Jesus God's "daughter" and our "sister".[6]

But beyond the complexities of trinitarian relations and theories of metaphor, the creeds also point us in a further direction. For just as the confession that God is father is connected to God's work as creator in the opening clauses of the creed, so also the confession that Jesus is son directs us not only to the truth about the triune God, but also to reality of the world and our lives. Our confession that Jesus is the son of God is intimately connected in the creed to the affirmation that "for us and for our salvation" he became flesh, became human.[7] In this way we come to understand that confessing Jesus as son tells us something not only about God, or about Jesus, but about us, our lives, our world, our reality, our experience.

What we confess and what we learn from our confession is that only in the realm of the world, the human, the flesh, only in the realm of the personal, the particular and the peculiar do we encounter God. Sonship language is itself personal (and therefore cannot be straightforwardly replaced by an abstract noun such as "redeemer"). It speaks of a particular life, a peculiar reality: historical in time; Jewish in ethnicity; and, yes, male in gender. As such, it is language that continually invites us to consider this world and our lives within it as arenas in which God can be found.

The four quotations I have provided above bear witness to this crucial aspect of Christian faith. For the Christian, the desire to get closer to God in love and understanding should never entail a separation from the reality of life in the world. Just because something is fully human, or fully of this world, does not make it any less capable of being the place where God is found. As a result, any suggestion that a better understanding of the historical, human Jesus can liberate us from the stifling straightjacket of metaphysical dogma stands in tension with the fundamental biblical affirmation that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

Of course, there are debates about whether John's gospel does not itself fall into the same trap. When the text goes on to state that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son", it is of course possible to so emphasize the otherworldly character of the notion of divine glory that the idea that it is definitively seen and known in the fleshly existence of this particular and peculiar life fades into the background. But the better reading of this text and the gospel as a whole sees Jesus as the one who not

[6] Other possibilities are also available, not least a recovery of the significance of Sophia-christology in the gospel tradition and, perhaps, within Jesus' self-understanding. UC minister Revd. Sally Douglas is exploring this trajectory in a PhD thesis at the Melbourne College of Divinity provisionally entitled "The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity".

[7] The Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed does this in a rhetorically elegant way by using the terms σαρκωθέντα and ἐνανθρωπήσαντα of the only-begotten Son, as a way of spelling out the meaning of his saving work.

only reveals God who is out there, but God for us down here (and who is so above all at the particular point of his death in the most peculiar, cruciform, way).

Paul bears witness in another way. The promise of God to be for the world is known in the ordinary words of apostolic preaching, but even more mundanely, Paul's changes in travel plans are themselves a reminder of God's decisive Yes to the world through Jesus the Son. Second Corinthians is replete with hostile polemic against those who would seek escape from the reality of life in the world, including the suffering that inevitably accompanies it. In language

> Just because something is fully of this world does not make it any less capable of being the place where God is found.

that echoes and riffs on the fleshly emphasis of John's prologue, Paul makes it clear to his readers: "We walk in the flesh, but we do not wage war according to the flesh" (2 Corinthians 10:3)

No theologian has seen this more clearly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Importantly, his call for a form of "religionless" or "worldly" Christian faith was built not simply on a particular understanding of the present state of the world (that it was "come of age") but on a particular and fully biblical understanding of what God had done for the world in and through Jesus Christ. It is worth letting Bonhoeffer speak to the theme more fully:

> Whoever confesses the reality of Jesus as the revelation of God confesses in the same breath the reality of God and the reality of the world, for they find God and the world reconciled in Christ. Just for this reason the Christian is no longer the person of eternal conflict. As reality is one in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole. Worldliness does not separate one from Christ, and being Christian does not separate one from the world. Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world.[8]

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* is about (among other things) the relationship between fathers and sons.[9] The story that John Ames tells is both autobiographical and biographical as Ames looks back to the experiences, idiosyncrasies and values of his own father and grandfather while, in turn, he seeks to make sense of his own life as a testimony to his young son. Central to this testimony is Ames' sense of both the singularity of his own life as a husband, minister and, finally, father. But the novel is shot through with the conviction that it is precisely in this life, and exactly in the world in which it is lived, that one comes to know glory.

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[8] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 64.

[9] Readers of *Cross Purposes* might wish to consult again "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson: Novelist and Theologian" (*CP* 23) and note that Robinson has herself written on Bonhoeffer and provided an endorsement on the back slipcover of the new DBWE translation of *Letters and Papers from Prison*. See Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer".

> It seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance for a moment or a year or a span of life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light … Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.[10]

So intense is Ames' sense of wonder at the world that he can imagine a thoroughly Christian reversal of the traditional idea that earth should become somehow "heavenly".

> I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know all this is mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity, this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.[11]

The potential for this world to become the raw material with which we might imagine and dream of the world to come is predicated on the belief that the God whose identity is known in the language of "father" and "son" has reconciled heaven and earth. What glory we see in this world we are able to see because we behold the glory of a father's only son.

Sean Winter is Professor of New Testament at the UC Theological College in Melbourne.

[10] Robinson, *Gilead*, 279f.

[11] Ibid., 65.

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Colin Honey

I Believe in Jesus Christ

It is difficult to identify what, precisely, some names refer to. What looks like a name can be more than it seems. "Jesus Christ" is a classical example.

Were it just a name like any other one might have to assume that there were many Jesus Christs; so different are the descriptions given by supporters, detractors, evangelists and apologists.

Which leads one to wonder whether "I believe in Jesus Christ" is as much about the referent as the significance of the believing.

There is a logical difficulty in the drawing of a distinction between the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History—as though they were two; which they must be, in order to draw such a distinction. If the distinction is stoutly defended then evidence for the existence of the one will necessarily be different from the evidence for the other.

That, I shall contend, is exactly so.

Famously, John Wesley sought to discover primitive Christianity; he wanted to discover the finest, least spoiled, essence of the faith: he sought it in study of the early church. Albert Schweitzer sought the primitive Jesus in the simplicity of the biblical minimalism afforded by the sophisticated biblical research of liberal theology. Both were rigorous projects worthy of the description scientific research and they serve to remind us of the magnitude of the task.

It is relatively easy to know all there is to know about the historical Jesus. Nor is it difficult to discover what others thought of him. His teaching can be known and his deeds assessed. His parents and family, details of his birth and death, and

significant influences upon him and those he had on others—all are able to be apprehended at least as readily as for many others who were as famous so long ago. The volume of the details has grown significantly and the material has been well-researched and is well-understood. With each new discovery there is new material added although, one imagines, the law of diminishing returns now must needs apply given that so much research has been done.

On the other hand, the Christ of Faith seems destined to carry an increasing load in the theological dialogue of our day and this, despite the over-dependence upon the speculative foundational role ascribed to it in the twentieth century by authors who knew not the art of judicious excision in their multi-voluminous dogmatical musings. While it is in principle possible to know everything about the Jesus of History, and in practice probable that most of the important extant facts are already known, there is no reason to be confident that the same can be said of the Christ of Faith.

Were it the case, therefore, that the Christ of Faith is the entity to which we refer when we say "I believe in Jesus Christ" then we might necessarily be less confident than we are in the case of the Jesus of History that we have a single, identifiable, comprehensible entity to whom we are referring. This amounts to the same thing as saying that the term "Jesus Christ" is, or refers to, a construct. Moreover, this construct is different from and potentially independent of the Jesus of History. The evidence for each is similarly different: we know very well how to test and prove a putative fact; the proof of a theological postulate or construct is quite another thing and depends as much upon the quality of the argument as the evidence.

Nor does that entail that the Christ of Faith is an empty, or erroneous, or unverifiable concept: just that it is not a matter of historical fact but one whose truth is to be accessed and assessed differently.

No-one says "I believe in the Jesus of History" any more than one would say "I believe in the historical John F. Kennedy". One might say "I believe in Jesus Christ" as one might "I believe in J. F. Kennedy as the saviour of the free world".

Intriguing are the emergent questions: What is the entity referred to, and what does it mean to believe in someone or thing.

In part, it means confirmation of my prejudices. In part, expression of my hopes. In part, identification of my values. In part, exemplification of my faith, insight, understanding, and imagination. Belief in someone is more interesting and important, it might seem, than belief in facts—even, and perhaps especially, where there is a disparity between the conceptual person (the construct) and the historical person.

Consider three examples: the Queen, Charles Darwin, and Global Warming.

We may say, "I believe in the Queen". It is scarcely necessary to notice that not to be a claim at all about the physical

existence of our monarch. Its reference is to a belief constructed of our understanding of a good society. Some believe that the monarch is the embodiment of the nation: that somehow the values and commitments and aspirations of the nation are given expression, shape and meaning by the monarch. Some believe that the monarch is a vehicle for God's will—a means by which God communicates his will to the world—and that the personal life of the monarch is incidental to the efficacy of the monarch in that process. Some believe that monarchy is just a good thing. Others, of course, say they do not believe, do not see the point, prefer other narratives.

To some extent belief in the royal family rests upon facts and interpretations of facts. It also depends on a theology of the monarchy. Likewise, belief in Jesus Christ is related in some way to the historical Jesus. It is as difficult to imagine belief in Jesus Christ without there having been a Jesus of History as to imagine a belief in a royal family without a history. But when people speak of belief in Jesus Christ they mean something more than the facts—something more akin to our description of belief in the Queen

We should note too that affirmations of belief in the Queen have particular relevance where they are made in contradistinction to a denial of the meaning, place or relevance of the monarchy. When one says "I believe in Jesus Christ" they are asserting something about the significance for them of Jesus Christ and are doing so in contrast to another view. The content of the term Jesus Christ will therefore be historically conditioned, relationally shaped, and contextually determined.

Secondly, were I to say "I believe in Charles Darwin" the reference is both specific (we know who he was) and indeterminate because historically conditioned, relatively shaped, and contextually determined.

Belief in Darwin is similarly controversial both in context and reference. It might be asserted in face of creationism or in contrast to an alternative science, should one emerge. The affirmation of such a belief is an assertion about a number of things that Charles Darwin is constructed to carry: scientific method, evolution, the validity of unintentionality, the non-involvement of the divine caprice in the origins of life on earth, and the meaning or validity of the Genesis accounts of creation.

Just so, belief in Jesus Christ is more fruitful and potentially edifying when cast in a similar mould. More than the man, a construct, and the better for it perhaps.

Thirdly, consider Global Warming: the belief that is "hold your breath" believing. It has the quality of hope about it, except that it is apocalyptical. As we hold our breath and believe in global warming we go beyond what we are entitled to believe (in any logical sense) but we base it upon what we are entitled to and extrapolate.

Churchill's leadership during World War II Britain had something of this character. Belief in Churchill and the

hope he held out was not propositional at all: nor yet relational as regards the content of the belief. It related not by fact but by aspiration. To the British people Churchill's belief gave hope; was hope. In apocalyptic times veracity derives not from propositions but from expressed hope. So it is in our time when we hope, beyond what is known, that global warming is reversible—because we first believe the diagnosis implicit in the affirmation "I believe in Global Warming".

This is a contemporary eschatology. It affirms a dreadful reality, deservedly inevitable, but which in faith and hope is reversible; the reality of which is potentially life-changing and redemptive. Just so. Belief in Jesus Christ involves us in holding our breath, screwing up our face, squeezing our eyes shut, and turning purple. It is an act of will.

Belief in Jesus Christ has about it the hope and fear that he will be as speculated, with inference from the evidence, and the reflective musings of the best minds.

Such eschatological belief is yet legitimate in that it is profoundly hopeful. The world, the values, the relationships, the wisdom, the compassion and care, the art and music, the imagination and the sheer love that is Christ is affirmed.

"I believe in Jesus Christ" means that for me Jesus Christ is decisive—that in Jesus Christ is represented a means of being: of being true to our inner selves; of being true to our role, relations and responsibilities; of enjoying the richness, fullness, consummation and joy that any god would want for his people and which God can evoke when we glimpse him in Jesus Christ.

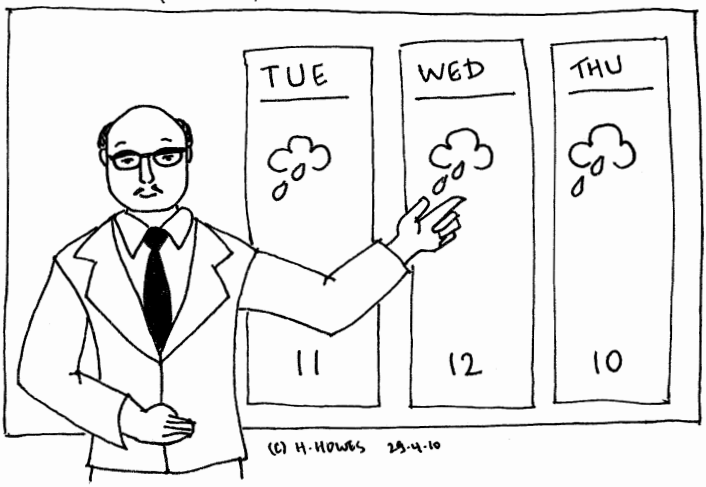
In that sense "I believe in Jesus Christ".

Colin Honey is minister of Foostcray and Yarraville Uniting Church parish.

double take

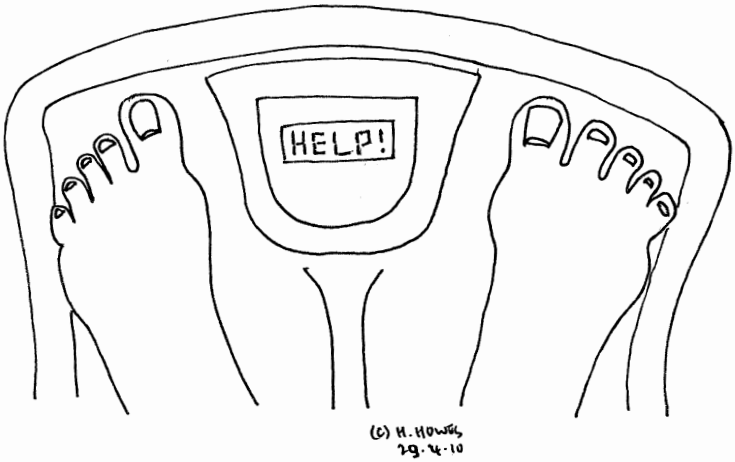
Hilary Howes

There's a special hymn for... METEOROLOGISTS:



"There shall be showers of blessing"

There's a special hymn for... DIETERS:



"And can it be that I should gain"

on Areopagus Hill

Bruce Barber

Theology's 'Reason' Confronts Atheism's 'Faith'

some desirable category corrections before the Melbourne Atheist Convention, 2012

Faith or reason? or more usually "reason against faith". At the outset, the most valuable question to ask is: Where has this duality come from? Who decided it was the right dichotomy? Why is it apparently set in concrete? Do we have to go on forever with this polarity? And if not, how do we speak about the matter?

Always the most interesting question turns out to be: What might I need to know to further the investigation? In other words, on a scale of 1 to 10, instead of starting at 6 or 7, accepting the terms of this apparent bifurcation, the more fundamental and helpful question might well be: What would 1 look like?

The Western philosophical, and consequently theological, tradition delights in polarities or binaries or dyadic constructs, whatever is the preferred designation. It is striking how the history of thought in the West can be read as a pendular movement between seemingly exclusive opposites: God/world; eternity/time; being/becoming; presence/absence; one/many; infinite/finite; spirit/matter; mind/body, and so it goes on as far as the imagination extends.

In addition to all these polarities there are other dyadic constructs which in theological presentations have frequently effectively functioned as antinomies, even though each is joined to the conjunction "and": nature *and* grace, nature *and* history, faith *and* history, revelation *and* reason, reason *and* experience, to name but some. To this list of course faith *and* reason must be added. None of these dualities coexists peaceably. Invariably, one of them has over time been privileged over the other, only itself to be replaced later by its constructed partner. Especially is this the case with reason and faith in and after the inauguration of what came to called Modernity, remembering John Locke's (1632-1704) definition of faith as "a persuasion of our own minds *short* of knowledge". Contrast this with Augustine and Anselm's *credo ut intellegam*, "I believe in order to understand", where "faith" is the pathway to knowledge, not an alternative to it.

But it all started a lot earlier than the militant philosophy of the

Descartes' method has dominated subsequent European and Western thought. Although Descartes' proof required God for its veracity, it was only a matter of time before later scepticism asserted that what falls *outside* the scope of the purported certain knowledge of reason is always a candidate for doubt. Augustine's maxim was now well and truly reversed. The pathway to knowledge is now not faith, but doubt. Hence, "honest doubt" is contrasted with "blind faith" in the folk language of modernity. So it goes, all the way down the line: religion, so it is assumed, belongs to the realm "above", science to our world "below"; religion is about "subjectivity", science, generically described, is about "objectivity"; religion is about "faith", science is about "reason". One only has to read the invariably smug letters to the editor in major newspapers to see this language at work.

From the side of theology, the relation between faith and reason had been expressed somewhat differently, most notably in the so-called "Methodist" or Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This was a methodology for theological reflection credited to John Wesley, although the term itself is of much more recent application. Wesley identified four different sources in arriving at theological conclusions: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. While the bible is the sole source of truth about God, the other three form a matrix for its interpretation, tradition being a "lens" rather than an infallible instrument in that process. That is to say, Tradition needs to be balanced and tested by Reason and Experience. For Wesley, Reason becomes the means by which we may evaluate and challenge the assumptions of Tradition. The chief test, however, of a particular interpretation of Scripture is how it comes to be expressed in practical Experience. That is to say, scriptural truths are to be primarily lived rather than to be simply thought about or merely believed. The point is that here the four sources are essentially unified in a common endeavour. The forces of the Enlightenment, however, insisted on the emancipation of both reason and experience from their erstwhile theological moorings, bringing us to the modern conflictual situation where "emancipated" reason and secular "experience" are now required to do battle with the presumed restrictive entities of scripture and the Christian tradition.

Given this legacy, now taken as an absolute, reform of the way the church needs to speak to the contemporary context is needed, at least in clarifying its own language. In this respect, it is somewhat odd that while Christian theology is possessed of something called a doctrine of reconciliation, this pivotal doctrine has scarcely been allowed to influence Christian *theological* formulations. Reconciliation is invariably, indeed rightly, applied to the moral or ethical life, but seldom, can we say, to the life of the mind. In this respect, the central presenting question pressing for an answer is: How can we articulate a theology of reconciliation if the *unreconciled* categories of reason and faith remain as antinomies?

Enlightenment. The grounding for this polarity between faith and reason was brought about most decisively in the great work of theological reconstruction of Thomas Aquinas in the twelfth century, derived as it was from the tradition of Greek rationalism and Augustinian theology. What happened was that during the tenth and eleventh centuries, the great Islamic commentaries of Aristotle had been translated into Latin. Subsequently, via Aquinas, Aristotle entered into the mainstream of Western theology.

How did it work? Aquinas made the fateful, although at the time compelling, distinction between those things that can be known by the work of reason alone, and those things that can be known only by revelation and faith. Among the former is the knowledge of the *existence* of God, and of the human soul; among the latter, such beliefs as the Trinity, the incarnation and the atonement.

Reconciliation is invariably applied to the moral or ethical life, but seldom to the life of the mind.

It would be no exaggeration to claim that, contrary to every intention, the origins of modern atheism begin just here, through the driving of a wedge between *speculative reason* on the one hand and *revelation* on the other. The consequences of this fatal step became apparent in the following centuries, culminating with the radically new heliocentric cosmology opened up by the work of Galileo, Copernicus, and Kepler. In this "new" world, the previously assured existence of God and the human soul was overturned. The price paid for the assistance of temporally-conditioned philosophy securing reality for theology was the demise of the entire system when the "old" knowledge structure changed. So it has continued to be; hence Jürgen Moltmann's wry observation that "the pathos of *modern* theology", i.e. theology grounded in some *a priori* concept of reason, "is that it always arrives too late".

It was in this climate of extreme scepticism that René Descartes received a commission from the Roman Catholic Church to develop a *proof* of the existence of God and of the soul. He did so, as is well known, by finding certainty in the existence of his own thinking mind, and seeking to build on this with logical arguments which had the clarity and indubitability of mathematics. Precisely on account of human awareness of the limitations experienced by the doubting subject, Descartes deduced the necessary existence of a perfect infinite being, namely God, on the principle that something cannot proceed from nothing. Again, it is no exaggeration to affirm that on this foundation the long tradition of natural theology here received its imprimatur as *the* necessary prolegomena for the specific grounding of theology in the self-revelation of God in Christ.

A promising way forward is near at hand within the church's own texts, namely by a recovery of the apostle Paul's urgent plea to the church in Rome:

> I appeal to you by the mercies of God that you present your bodies … as your rational (*logiken*) worship … Do not be not conformed to the spirit of this age (*aeon*), [i.e. presumably through the employment of eclectic reason], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind (*noos*). (Romans 12:1f)

When and where this is allowed to happen, true cognition, compelling obedience, and authentic experience emerge. One no longer has any need to talk about faith *and* reason, indeed precious few *conceptual* "ands" remain in the theological vocabulary at all, except perhaps the mandatory love of God *and* of the neighbour. But even here, "and" as a copulative conjunction is surely "reformed" by its overriding christological resolution.

In a word, what needs to be demonstrated in a world constructed by modernity—and, we might add, a world diminished by modernity—is not to continue with the inherited polarities of reason *and* faith, as if these have somehow fallen down from heaven as a permanent given—a given that requires our anachronistic juggling efforts, which to this point it seems have been doomed to failure.

Rather, here as elsewhere, it remains true that what God has joined together, Christian discourse must never try to separate. What is desperately needed if there is to be a future for genuine theology out of our inherited ruins are "baptized brains", brains which know how to think out of a renewed, creative, reconstituted centre of *post-modern* Christian doctrine. Even if the sad conclusion seems inescapable that present day atheists and contemporary Christians have given up mutual conversation—confident that all parties have got the whole matter properly sorted out—the mandate remains.

In other words, what Christian theology in the third millennium is called to articulate in the whole reach of its investigations is not reason *and* faith, but its genuine alternative—"the rationality *of* faith".

Bruce Barber is a retired minister and former Dean of the United Faculty of Theology.

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