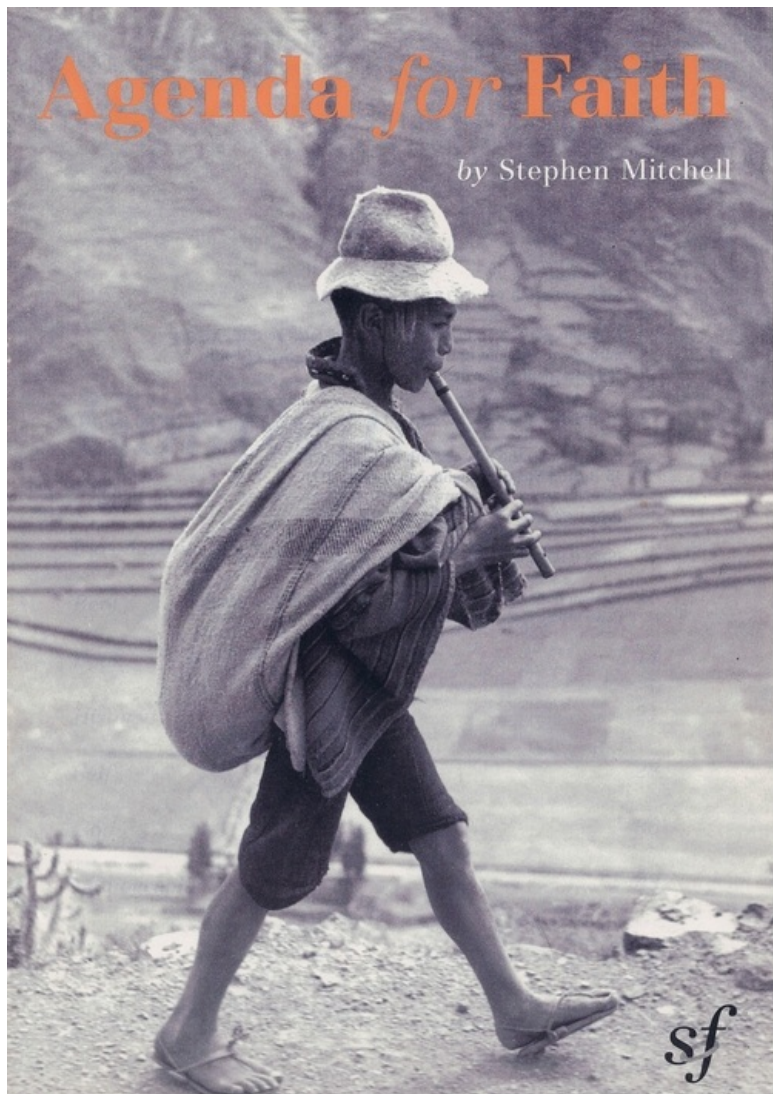


# *Agenda for Faith*

by Stephen Mitchell



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"What is real?" asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the skin horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

M. Williams Bianco, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

## *Preface to the Second Edition*

**C**an the church change its beliefs? Can it rewrite its creeds? When I wrote *Agenda for Faith* in the early 1990s I believed that it could and should. I was keen to see the church change.

It's not surprising that having been a priest in the Church of England for twenty-five years I wanted to see a growing future for the church. Many people whose beliefs had changed were giving up on the church. I met some of them in the Sea of Faith Network. My faith had also changed but I wanted the church to accept that change.

I knew that it was not easy for the church to change. In the past, doctrinal change had led to reformation and schism. I was concerned to see what other strategies for change were available.

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One strategy for changing the doctrine of church is to show that some things are simply incredible. It is simply unbelievable to believe, for example, in the devil, or hell or the virgin birth. It isn't difficult to persuade people that they don't need to believe in some of these things. Many people in church congregations are all too willing to give up on hell and the devil.

But to make a real difference this has to be written into the formal beliefs and structures of the church. Unless the church officially acknowledges that it's OK to give up on the devil and hell, nothing really changes. Or worse, because the belief is still expressed in hymns, creeds, liturgies and the official teaching of the church, the very people who are persuaded to give up on these doctrines are frustrated with the language they are being asked to use Sunday by Sunday. Parents may think that belief in the devil is incredible but when it comes to the baptism of their babies they are asked to

*Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil*

The strategy of attacking individual doctrines is not without hope. In 2001 a survey showed that a third of the clergy in the Church of England doubt or disbelieve in the resurrection and only half were convinced of the truth of the Virgin Birth.

The survey was conducted on behalf of Cost of Conscience, a movement against the ordination of women. The report went on to say that the doubts are higher amongst women priests.

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*Jesus is asserted as the only way to salvation by a pitiful 53% of male clergy. Even so, this is streets ahead of the women priests who can only muster a 39% assurance.*

*Belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ is more positive with male clergy confidence up to 68%, while female clergy just make it over the halfway line at 53%.*

*Belief in the Virgin Birth tumbles to 58% certainty in male clergy and collapses to a dismal 33% in women clergy.*

For Cost of Conscience the message was clear. Look what you get with women priests! Women priests are eroding traditional belief! But for radicals like myself, this was a Trojan horse. The church is susceptible in this media age to respond to common ethical concerns like the equality of women. However as the church responds and allows women to play a fuller part in the life of the church its doctrinal conservatism is weakened.

The Modern Churchperson's Union responded to these statistics by saying that the church had to reassess complex doctrine in the face of increasingly educated congregations. It often seems that the church tries to ignore such findings. It seems to hope that more and more people will find such belief irrelevant, that the clergy will stop preaching them, so that in the end they will simply be forgotten. When this fails and it is forced to reassess a doctrine, the church comes up with a form of

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words that tries to keep conservatives and radicals happy.

So with hell, for example. Here is a paragraph from the Church of England's Doctrine Commission's Report of 1995 *The Mystery of Salvation*.

*Over the last two centuries the decline in the churches of the western world of a belief in everlasting punishment has been one of the most notable transformations of Christian belief. . . Nevertheless it is our conviction that the reality of hell (and indeed heaven) is the ultimate affirmation of the reality of human freedom. Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being. . . . Whether there be any who do so choose, only God knows.*

And one is tempted to add that only God knows what such a convoluted statement could mean.

Even when the church comes up with such a revision, no one believes that this is the church's belief. I was invited into an Upper School to talk to some Year 9 students about the church's belief in hell. On the notice boards in the RE room were statements on the church's belief about hell. They were simply untrue. We had fun with medieval pictures of hell but it was assumed by the teacher, as well as the students, that this was still what the church believed. And what I should believe. Even

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when I read from the official document “Hell is not eternal torment” the students didn’t believe me!

A second strategy to change the church’s beliefs is to say that if we cannot get rid of the doctrine we will re-interpret it. If there is no hope of getting the church to say “We don’t believe in hell” let us say “I believe in hell but it’s here, now, among us in the midst of war and famine. It’s of our making.”

This has some mileage particularly for preachers. It’s a way of using the old language and highlighting today’s issues in a dramatic and religious way. To say that we are already in hell may be more powerful than saying we risk hell in the life to come. The kingdom of hell is upon you! But such interpretation can only go so far. In the end someone is going to say “So you don’t really believe in hell, do you?”

I wrote *Agenda for Faith* not long after Anthony Freeman had published *God in Us*. His book was an attempt to change our interpretation of God.

*Only when I had accepted that ‘I do not believe in God’ (my old God) was I free to discover how with integrity I could still say ‘I believe in God’ (understood in a new way).*

*God in Us* created a real stir and forced a lot of people to think about their faith. Anthony Freeman paid a real price for speaking out. It cost him his job. But the church could and did just brush it aside. What you really mean Anthony is you don’t believe in God, full stop. This is atheism pure and simple.

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So *Agenda for Faith* tried a third strategy. Having decided there was little future in trying to get rid of incredible doctrines and that even re-interpreting them could only go so far, it was time to adopt another strategy. It's not faith that has changed, it's philosophy. Every faith has to be expressed through a philosophy. We all have ideas about what is real and unreal, about establishing meaning and truth, about human life and what it is to be a person. Faith is about all these things. If our understanding of all these things changes, faith is bound to change too. And not only faith. Whatever we are talking about - science, art or religion - our change of philosophy changes the way we understand all these aspects of human life.

In the 1990s I thought this strategy had a real chance of working. In an earlier Church of England Doctrine Commission Report called *We believe in the Holy Spirit* there was a section entitled What is truth? Some approaches and models. It included a discussion about pragmatism and the philosophy of Richard Rorty. It concluded

*In Christian tradition all these models have some part to play.*

When the Anthony Freeman debate was going on, I wrote to the *Church Times* pointing to this conclusion and telling Anglicans they would do well to take this report down from their shelves.

The Revd Professor Anthony Thiselton who was responsible for this section of the report was not amused.

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*I wrote, he said, that “all” approaches must be taken into account, and Mr Mitchell interprets this to validate Rorty’s theory as “one among all”; whereas the context makes it clear that “all means all in contrast to one only”. . . I have the privilege of sharing in the teaching and research supervision with colleagues in the Department of Philosophy here. Those with whom I have discussed Rorty’s approach entirely share my view that his theory of truth is philosophically simplistic.*

To which Mr Mitchell replied the following week

*If Rorty’s approach is found “philosophically simplistic”, why does the Doctrine Commission’s report say “the force of this approach is considerable” and describe it as a “highly sophisticated” refinement of the pragmatic position.*

The day the letter was published I had a telephone call from the good Professor Thiselton!

In that same year, 1993, Don Cupitt wrote a Face to Faith article in the Guardian entitled God only knows (well we don’t). It began

*Did you know that the non-realist view of God, that attracts so much ire at the moment, is in fact startlingly close the historic Christian orthodoxy.*

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Here was a fourth strategy that I later tried in *God in the Bath* (O Books 2006). The strategy works because most of what classical, orthodox Christianity says about God is that God is unknowable. As Cupitt wrote in the same article

*Classical Christianity inherited from the Greeks the view that God is unknowable. God is said to be infinite but our minds can work only by thinking things through finite categories and concepts. So God eludes the human mind: he is incomprehensible.*

Because God is unknowable and incomprehensible, then everything that is said in classical, orthodox Christianity is metaphorical. The strategy presses the negative theological strand in classical Christianity and exposes its metaphorical nature.

There may be fifth strategy for radicals in the church. Raimon Panikkar, a Spanish Roman Catholic priest and scholar, put forward the view that the history of the Christian tradition can be divided into three periods. The first was that of Christendom, when culture, faith, political life and territory all came together. People in Christendom never really engaged with anyone who disagreed with them. Those who did disagree were locked up or burnt. People centred around a single ideological world-view.

With European exploration, and with the discovery of the New World, Africa and India, Christendom gave way to Christianity, an integrated system of

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belief in contrast to other systems. At this period there was the invention of -isms - Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism - words coined by the European west. The period of Christianity is marked by evangelism, conversion, a conquering of the world - "The world for Christ in one generation".

With the wane of such imperialistic ambitions, and the intellectual challenge to the systems of belief, Christianity, argues Panikkar, has come to end. Christianity is giving way to Christianness.

Christianness, according to Panikkar, is the encounter with Christ at the centre of one's self, at the centre of the human community and at the centre of reality and would come to be "an ecclesiastical mutation" in Christian self-understanding beyond that of medieval Christendom and modern Christianity.

*To be Christian can be understood as the confession of a personal faith that adopts an attitude analogous to that of Christ. . . I give the name Christianness to a new, but genuine Christian consciousness... This new conviction is spreading throughout the world, especially among the younger generations, and among those who have moved away from the over-institutionalization of Christianity, official Christianity in particular.*

(The Dawn of Christianness", CrossCurrents, New York 2000)

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The church is moving in this direction which may give it the opportunity to return to its roots without entangling itself in doctrinal squabbles. Looking back on what I wrote in *Agenda for Faith*, I see that I was part of that mutation seeking to understand the reality at the centre of human life beyond medieval Christendom and modern Christianity.

Thanks to Rob Wheeler for his help and encouragement in producing this second edition.

Stephen Mitchell

Gazeley 2011

# *Introduction*

*God, self, history and book are bound in an intricate relationship in which each one mirrors the other. No single concept can be challenged without altering the others. (Mark C. Taylor, *Erring*)*

When people come to faith, they talk about their lives changing, about becoming new people, re-born and re-created. For them, there is not only a new vision but a new world. As they read their scriptures and join in worship, so they begin to see themselves differently. As their lives take on new perspectives, so their hopes for themselves and the world change. Yet faith can change too. Growing up, growing old, learning and living, challenge our understanding of ourselves and our world. And as the wheel of fortune turns so the intricate, kaleidoscopic, binding relationship of faith creates a new pattern of life. Everything changes. There is a new world, a new beginning.

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This has been my experience and I've tried, in this book, to explore the changing pattern of my faith. Some people have accused me of losing my faith. But if I had lost my faith, I would have stopped worshipping and resigned my ministry in the church. Other people have accused me of making up a new faith. Whatever it is, it isn't Christian, they say. But I still live, move and have my being in the Christian church.

The experience has been radical and revolutionary. I don't claim to be better for it or more enlightened or free. If anything, I'm more conscious of being bound to the religion and relationships that make up my life, more in the dark about the pain and suffering of life and less sure of the way to right wrongs. But such insecurities bring their own sense of confidence and comfort, confidence to accept my vulnerability and comfort in a life bound to others.

For the last ten years I have lived in the Leicestershire village of Barrow-upon-Soar. I have worshipped with and ministered to the congregations and parishioners of Holy Trinity Church, Barrow-upon-Soar and St Mary's Church, Walton-le-Wolds. Their support, patience, affection and good humour has been invaluable as I have explored and refashioned my faith among them.

I owe a great debt to my wife Julie. It is easy to ask someone to share in experiences which are liberating and enlightening; not so easy when they generate feelings of uncertainty and isolation. I have experienced both these extremes while recreating

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my faith and without the support of my family I would have given up long ago.

My debt to my former teacher at Cambridge, Don Cupitt, is obvious to all those who know the literature, but goes beyond his teaching and writings. His personal support and concern for me, as for many parish priests, has encouraged me in my ministry.

Today I am fortunate to be able to explore my faith with people in and outside the churches through the Sea of Faith Network. As a founder member of this network, I have enjoyed discussing religious ideas with fellow explorers in a rich environment and with a freedom I have not experienced elsewhere. I am particularly grateful to members of the East Midlands Sea of Faith Group. Coming from many different religious backgrounds and some having no religious affiliation at all, their breadth of interest and experience is a constant source of inspiration.

Several people have helped me in the preparation of this book. I am especially grateful to Frances Thompson and Richard Middleton for their encouragement and detailed constructive suggestions and to others who have commented on early drafts of the text - David Boulton, Amanda Harding and David Hart and to Alison Webster and Martin Davies from Graft Publications for their professional expertise.

## *Real*

*Lead me from the unreal to the real, from  
darkness to light, from death to life.  
(The Upanishads )*

When I was an evangelical Christian student, I thought religion was easy and uncomplicated. The truths of faith had been revealed and all I had to do was receive them. There was no sense of embarking on a journey, a quest for the real me and the real meaning of life. If someone had suggested to me that I should be a spiritual pilgrim in search of the real, I would have laughed and accused them of reading too much Plato.

Plato told an unlikely tale of some prisoners, born and brought up in a cave. There they lived, and had lived for the whole of their lives, chained to their seats. All they could do, and all they had ever done, was watch and discuss the play of shadows on the cave wall. These shadows were cleverly created by puppeteers who stood behind the prisoners,

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projecting images of people and objects on to the wall by the light of a fire.

One day, a prisoner was released. Forced to turn round, he saw the awful truth of his situation. Dragged out of the cave, he further realised that life in the cave was but a shadow of a more real and more glorious world illuminated by the sun. But the prisoner's ordeal was far from over. He was taken back into the cave where he tried to convince his fellow prisoners that there was a better and more real world for them to enjoy if only they would allow him to release them. The prisoners were not convinced. They saw that as he came in from the light, he stumbled and groped his way through the darkness. They taunted him, threatened to kill him and dismissed his ideas as delusions.

Twenty years ago I would have said there was no need for us to make that kind of journey in search of the real. Jesus had made it for us. He had burst the chains of sin and death and borne insults and torment for our sake. When we accept his gospel, the light of life breaks through into the darkness of our lives. Religion was not a journey but the acceptance of the gospel. The human quest was already at an end.

Such a faith, I thought, was easily tested with a check list of questions. Do you believe in God? Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins? Do you believe in the power of the Holy Spirit? More simply and with faith centred on Jesus, Is Jesus the Lord and Saviour of your life? And as proof of my commitment, I was asked to sign on the dotted line.

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I did not sign and had to admit, even then, that the acceptance of faith was a paradoxical process. I framed the contradictions in evangelical terms. Had I decided to follow Jesus or had the Spirit led me to salvation? Did a person choose God or did God choose his people? Although a great deal was said about God's righteousness and commandments, morality focused narrowly on personal and sexual ethics. Despite the emphasis upon fellowship and mutual support, there was little exploration of justice and peace in a social and political context. As a result, I was obsessed with myself, with the individual and the individual's state of grace.

So in those days, my starting point for an exploration into God was the teachings of the church - its doctrines handed down from generation to generation, presented in creeds, liturgies and preaching and witnessed to by the bible. I began with Jesus and his significance for my life and my needs. Now, some twenty years later, I begin the exploration into God with the search for the real. For in one respect, Plato was right. The spiritual quest goes hand in hand with an exploration of the real. The journey to God is a journey from the unreal to the real.

I admit it seems a curiously abstract and difficult place to begin and some explanation is needed. First, the real world in which we live and work is shaped for us by the language and stories of our art, faith, culture, conversation and commerce. It is given a foundation through the knowledge and truths derived from our systems of information and inquiry. It is a world which interacts with us and

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flows through us and the realities of our world come from the very practical business of living in this textual, historical and personal environment. So I begin my exploration into God examining the way we handle the language and stories that shape our world.

Second, I choose this starting point in order to give faith a place in every aspect of life. Classically faith has never just been about the claims of a religion or its founder, nor just about personal salvation, nor even just about moral and social responsibilities. Faith has been seen to affect every part of our being, even creating the reality of our world. The human and spiritual quest is an exploration to be pursued in any and every corner of life.

But I also adopt this strategy in the light of fairly recent publicity. In 1992, I appeared on a BBC *Heart of the Matter* programme broadcast on Easter Day. Joan Bakewell set out to see whether clergy who did not believe in the physical resurrection were honest enough to admit this in their preaching. The programme hit the headlines even before it was broadcast. "Clergy question truth of risen Christ". "Doubting clergy must quit". Jill Parkin reviewed the programme for the *Daily Express*.

*Did you see that amazing Joan Bakewell programme on Easter Sunday about some of today's clergy who can hardly muster two beliefs to rub together?*

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*She interviewed a whole clutch of radical reverends who don't believe in the divinity of Christ or that he rose from the dead.*

*They make the Bishop of Durham, a mere virgin-birth doubter, look like John the Baptist.*

*"The tomb was empty, but I don't know what happened to the body" said one, rolling away a corner stone of Christianity and taking the Gospel out of the gospels. I suppose it makes reciting the apostles' creed quite a bit shorter - none of that stuff about rising on the third day. But you're left wondering what's left.*

*It's shocking enough for us non-believers to have men and women of the cloth turning the wine into water like this.*

*Heaven knows - or maybe they would say that was overstating the case for heaven - what their congregations think.*

*It must be like discovering your local double-glazing pusher lives in a tent.*

*(Daily Express, 22nd April 1992).*

This review disturbed me because it revealed that at a popular level, belief is equated with thinking that certain credal statements are true. It is like completing a magazine questionnaire entitled Do you believe? Tick the boxes and add up your score. Eight out of ten: relax, you're a true believer; three

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to seven: definite room for improvement; under three: time to head for the Job Centre. The church becomes a club with rules making it easy for Jill Parkin to describe herself as a non-believer. She does not wish to belong to the believer's club and need not assent to its rules. Yet she can demand that the clergy, the officials of the club, should firmly adhere to its tenets.

It is a neat way of pushing faith aside into a department of its own, there for those who are able to sign up to the creeds and who like taking part in religious rituals. In the programme, I explained that faith was not for me a matter of running down a list of credal statements. I wanted to do something much more radical than question particular doctrines. I had no interest in altering one or two of the club's rules.

It was clear from responses to the programme that in the public mind there were ministers who believed even less than the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins. He had challenged belief in the virgin birth and the physical resurrection. Here now were clergy who seemed to be prepared to let go of life after death and the divinity of Christ. What next? Was there anything left for them to believe?

My conclusion was that concentrating on particular doctrines of belief made it virtually impossible to suggest that faith might be something very different and involve questions of interpretation and meaning and the nature of reality. It was inevitable that faith would be marginalised and become a pastime for those who accepted the credal check list.

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This was confirmed a year later when Anthony Freeman published *God in Us - a case for Christian Humanism*. The author was Priest-in-Charge of St Mark's, Staplefield in the Diocese of Chichester. He was also the Bishop's Advisor for Continuing Ministerial Education. He sent his Bishop an advance copy of the book and was immediately dismissed from his teaching post.

In the press coverage, the doubting priest had become the "godless" and "atheist" vicar. Here was a priest who did not believe in God, a clergyman daring to demolish the remaining pinnacle of belief. More similes were found for the godless vicar. He was like "a photographer who doesn't like cameras", a mechanic who works in a garage and "hates motor cars" (Lord Snowdon in *The Times*), a vegetarian who works in a butcher's shop, "a high-wire artist who doesn't believe in wire" and "a plumber who doesn't believe in call out charges" (*The Observer*).

On the cover, the book was startlingly frank.

*Last year Anthony Freeman, an Anglican priest, had a "conversion experience" from a Christianity which had become oppressive to one which brought a glorious sense of freedom and joy. It happened when he plucked up courage to say, "I do not believe in God."*

Inside the book Anthony Freeman was saying much more.

*But how can I be a Christian if I do not believe in God? Doesn't it make me an atheist? Put*

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*that way) the question assumes that there is only one meaning to the word God and that we all know exactly what it is ... In my case I needed to be rid of one idea of God in order to make room for a new one. (page 15).*

So he was trying to exchange one idea of God for another.

*Now I have decided to change my use of the term God. Instead of referring it to a supernatural being) I shall apply it to the sum of all my values and ideals in life. (page 25).*

He then went on to explore Christian faith without the supernatural in chapters on traditional, credal themes - Jesus, the Holy Spirit and Eternal Life.

At the end of July 1994, Anthony Freeman became the first parish priest this century to have his licence withdrawn for publishing his theological views. A letter of support from over 70 clergy published in the *Independent* on 28th July 1994 triggered a second wave of publicity.

I helped to get that letter published because I felt he had a right to publish his views and remain in his post. But I was far less happy to defend his theology. Certainly the book struck a chord with many people inside and outside the churches but serious debate highlighted the same concerns I had over the *Heart of the Matter* programme. The book made much of a contrast between the supernatural world and the natural world.

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*Freed from the burden of trying to believe in a supernatural world we shall find a new joy in the natural world and in human life. (page 14).*

For me, it was not that the supernatural had become incredible and that we were now obliged to turn our attention to the credible and natural. The whole environment of our belief - our approach to texts and systems of thought of all kinds - was changing and affecting not only our view of God and the supernatural but our view of every other aspect of human life. *God in Us* had not gone far enough. The remaking of faith for our day demanded not only a re-creation of our doctrines but a re-creation of our minds. A revision of God required a revision of reality.

And again, it seemed to me that Anthony Freeman was relegating faith to the side lines. To speak of God as "my ideals personified" forces us to wonder why he should continue to personify such values. Certainly, as he pointed out, we say "Duty calls" and "Loyalty demands". But what is to be gained by saying such things? If he was now free to find joy in the natural world and in human life, why did he not simply abandon religion altogether? How was religious practice a help in finding such joy?

Faith suffered the same marginalisation in ethics. By speaking of God as "the sum of all my values and ideals in life", he was suggesting that these values and ideals were already well established. Religious practice was simply a way of motivating action in accordance with these ideals. Perhaps they were not

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so well established. Perhaps there were better ways of finding such inspiration.

Faith, for me, was much more central and challenging than this. For those who practise a faith, questions about the credibility of their faith are not usually uppermost in their minds. The truth of creeds and doctrines is not usually the starting point for their faith. They begin with an exploration of worship, prayer and the reading of the scriptures. They follow the saints and seek to pursue justice and peace. As they immerse themselves in all this, they immerse themselves in their God, the God in whom they live and move and have their being. God and the world are for them created, discovered and defined in the living out of their faith.

Those who practise a faith also find that the language of faith challenges their most commonly held assumptions. Christians, for example, speak of their baptism as a dying with Christ and a rising to new life. In their worship they say "We are the Body of Christ". They seek Christ in their neighbour and the needy. This is not, for them, poetic imagery pointing to hidden, supernatural truths. For the believer, this language is sacramental. Rather than pointing to Christ, it identifies the believer with Christ - an identification which redefines the common sense views of our relationship to time, space and personal identity.

That to me is the nature of religious experience, language and practice. What is needed is a strategy which in remaking our understanding of God also remakes our world. The revision of faith has to

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penetrate every aspect of our lives. Reshaping God must go hand in hand with a reshaping of reality, for nothing less than this is claimed by the practice, language and experience of faith.

In his book *Erring*, Mark C. Taylor describes the relationship between God and other aspects of our world.

*God, self, history, and book are bound in an intricate relationship in which each mirrors the other. No single concept can be challenged without altering the others.*

I want to shape a new vision of God by looking at the challenges which are now facing these other closely related concepts. Examining the way we use texts to give meaning to our world, and looking at the way we see ourselves as individuals within society, is an exploration into God.

Ironically and not always very helpfully, this strategy is sometimes labelled "non-realism" and it may be useful to give a broad picture of the shift in vision this entails.

I taught music before I became an Anglican priest. As music students fresh from school, my fellow undergraduates and I prided ourselves in appreciating a wide variety of music from Bach to Boulez and the Beatles. There were only two types of music, we said, good and bad. We may have been uncertain about the criteria to be used in judging a piece of music but we were confident that our

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knowledge, training and expertise enabled us to say why Mozart stood above his contemporaries.

Later we learned to place music within its cultural and social environment. Whether it was good or bad, we became interested in the way music reflected economic, social, political, religious and philosophical developments. Occasionally, we even dared to look at the music of "other cultures" and its influence upon the western tradition.

The result was to change our view of the "Great Composers". When I was much younger, my piano teacher had a grand piano on which stood the busts of the musical greats. Along with Beethoven were Bach, Schubert, Brahms and Liszt and one or two others. They stood there like gods in a timeless heaven - the All Time Greats. These immortal composers were often portrayed as writing immortal music, the music of the Gods, expressing heavenly and eternal Beauty. As students of music, we were beginning to see composers as the musicians of their time and society. Their style of composition changed throughout their lives and the fortunes of their music changed from generation to generation. Even the choice of composers immortalized in bronze, plaster and plastic was an expression of a particular age.

Our understanding of beauty was also changing. Dipping our toes into the troublesome waters of aesthetics, we were having to concede, somewhat reluctantly, that it was better to look for beauty not in the music itself, but in music's place in society. Beauty was not an aspect of compositional

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technique. It was not discovered through a close analysis of the score. Listening to music was an aesthetic experience. A good piece of music was one that successfully produced the sorts of experience people valued. We did not use the word but we were becoming "non-realists" in music. The experiences we described as beautiful were real enough. But notions of beauty, goodness and meaning in music were, it seemed, better understood in relation to the listeners and conventions of their time than in some unchanging technical aspect of the music. Beauty was not something to be found eternally behind or in the music but an aspect of its place in the life of the listener, performer and culture. And it was a humbling concession for us to make. No longer could we claim a privileged position, because of our technical knowledge of music, as arbiters of taste and interpreters of beauty.

More generally, the "non-realist" argument tries to put everything - beauty, truth, meaning, the self, even reality itself - within the relational, cultural world of human beings. It suggests that all these ideas are best understood not as things independent of us, and upon which our language and descriptions depend, but as aspects of the interactions of human beings. Our ideas of them depend upon the nature of our human negotiations.

For me, as a "non-realist", faith - and not just faith but every other branch of human activity - is like art. Theology, writings about the gods, even the gods themselves can be dated and placed and become as fashionable in the same way as art. Like an antiques expert or a wine connoisseur, a religious

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historian can date and place scriptures, hymns, prayers, liturgies and religious artefacts with great precision. Within our own lives, we watch our beliefs and the style of our believing change over time and circumstance.

By saying faith is like art, I am not belittling it. Far from it. We are not worried that music reflects its age. We do not stop practising it or write it off as mere entertainment. Art moves us and changes our vision and resolve, even our lives. Art can do all these things precisely because it is alive and born out of human culture. An artistic tradition that never changes becomes decadent, and an unchanging faith is lifeless and idolatrous. (Although, ironically, idols carved in wood or stone also reflect the age from which they come).

There are considerable advantages to seeing faith, like art, as a human creation. I do not see faith, for example, as being right or wrong nor doctrines as true or false. I accept the tradition as a whole. I do not feel compelled to get rid of parts of the faith which seem incredible. Credibility is no longer the criterion for judging faith and credal boundaries have lost, for me, their defining power. I judge faith by its fruits. Does it continue to move us and motivate us? Is it still inspiring and liberating us? And if faith seems to be oppressive or responsible for grotesque attitudes and actions, then I feel that we are free to work towards changing it. Where faith is seen as supernaturally fixed, it takes superhuman efforts to change it.

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My attitude towards faith is less competitive. I view other faith traditions as I view the music of other cultures. My ears may not be attuned to it and much of it may pass me by as little more than irritating noise, but it may equally fascinate me and challenge my own tradition. Certainly I do not see myself in competition, nor feel the need to harmonise all the manifestations of faith into one single enterprise. I feel free to adopt and absorb elements of other faith traditions into my own. And I recognise that my own heritage of faith is a kaleidoscopic pattern and that seamless traditions are woven from a multitude of coloured threads.

Faith also becomes less enslaving. It is our responsibility, in our hands. If we see faith as handed down to us from a supernatural world "up there", we put ourselves down. Like life in a stately home, there will be a grand, dazzling, aristocratic upstairs world and a poor shadowy downstairs world of servants. Those in service have little control or power over their lives and are made to feel grateful for having somewhere to live. Any contrast between a world "up there" and this world - be it heaven and earth, life after death and life now, the divine and the human, theory and reality - robs us of the responsibility for creating meaning and value.

A more artistic vision of faith also helps me to understand the position of those of us dubbed "godless vicars". Attempting to create a faith for our generation, we find our work being assessed by orthodox criteria. Credibility may not be the criterion by which I judge faith but for the church

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and its bishops credal boundaries still retain their defining power. Our survival within the institution depends upon our ability to paint our faith in the colours of conservative doctrine. We are like subversive artists working under an oppressive regime who are forced to submit to ideological or aesthetic conventions and regulations. And as Anthony Freeman's case demonstrated, failure to do so results in dismissal.

Above all, seeing faith as art and notions of truth and meaning as aspects of the relational world of human beings, brings the ethical into the spiritual quest. Truth and goodness, reality and righteousness have always been seen as interdependent sides of the character of God. How things are and how we should live come together in the search for God. The exploration of reality becomes the exploration of our relating.

I now find liberating and creative advantages in seeing faith as a human creation but there have been hard questions. Can faith and art transcend their culture? Is faith only a human creation or does each generation attempt to depict some eternal, unchanging truths and realities? Is there a core of essential beliefs that are to be found in the faith of every age? Are there no boundaries for faith, no criteria by which to judge interpretations of the tradition? And if not, where is the moral driving force of religion?

These are difficult questions which the "non-realist" has to face. My testimony is that in making the journey described in the following chapters I have

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found it leading from darkness to light and from death to life.

## Book

The presents we give our friends are often the presents we would like ourselves. At the time of the *Heart of the Matter* programme, my wife was completing an English degree. I bought her a book called *Meaning by Shakespeare* by Terence Hawkes and began to read it myself. I discovered some fascinating ideas. For example:

*Traditionally, critics, producers, actors and audiences of Shakespeare have assumed ... that the "meaning" of each play is bequeathed to it ... and lies ... artfully concealed ... within its text. Each account or production of the play, then offers to discover and lay hold of this meaning, hoisting it triumphantly, like buried treasure into view. It is as if, to the information which used to be given in theatrical programmes, "Cigarettes by Abdullah, Costumes by Motley, Music by*

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*Mendelssohn," we should add "Meaning by Shakespeare." (p.3)*

But, says Hawkes, suppose we cannot unearth "essential" meanings. Suppose there is no buried treasure to be dug out. If the texts do not transmit a meaning intended and embodied by the author, what on earth do Shakespeare's plays do? How do they work? What are they for?

Hawkes indeed goes on to question whether we can dig out essential meanings and proposes something rather different.

*We use them in order to generate meaning. In the twentieth century, Shakespeare's plays have become one of the central agencies through which our culture performs this operation. That is what they do, that is how they work, and that is what they are for. Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean by Shakespeare. (p.3)*

The essay from which these passages are taken is entitled *By*. Hawkes is suggesting that we should no longer see the text as having one, true, essential meaning given by the author. Rather, we create meanings for our culture by use of the plays.

Hawkes gives the example of *Hamlet*. From being a play written by a promising Elizabethan playwright, *Hamlet* has become part of a body of work called "English literature" and "Shakespeare", even part of a system of mass education. Bits of its language have become embedded in everyday speech and it

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helps to shape the way we understand relationships in our society. We even use it, he says, to name a cigar.

I found these ideas fascinating but as a priest and a preacher, entertaining these proposals raised some important and alarming questions. If we have no access to essential meanings intended by the author what happens to our reading of the bible? The scriptures are, after all, said to be the Word of God.

Hawkes's proposals stand in sharp contrast to this classical statement, taken from the Vatican II documents, on how to use the scriptures.

*The interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.*

Here is a "buried treasure" account of meaning with its treasure doubly concealed. First the meaning implanted by the biblical writers has to be dug out and then, secondly, the interpreter has to unearth from their words the intentions of God.

The task, however, is even more complicated because the scriptures are said to be not only the Word of God but sacred history, a record of the history of God's action in the world. So before the task of interpretation can begin, the historical events which make up this drama of redemption have themselves to be dug out from the text.

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Anyone who begins to think seriously about the bible will recognise the enormity of the task of interpreting scripture in this way. They will also begin to understand the implications of adopting Hawkes' proposals.

When I was taking a few weeks sabbatical at a theological college, I heard a sermon delivered by a student training for the ministry. He began his sermon by trying to dig out the historical events. He was preaching from the last chapter of John's Gospel where, not long after the resurrection, seven of Jesus' disciples go fishing. After fishing all night without success, a stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. They catch a huge haul of one hundred and fifty-three fish.

"Why one hundred and fifty-three?" asked the preacher. To the amusement of the congregation he explained the significance of this number for earlier commentators.

Augustine had said it represented those who were saved by Law and Spirit. Ten (for the Law) plus seven (for the Holy Spirit) make seventeen and one hundred and fifty-three is the sum of the first seventeen natural numbers! Jerome recorded that Greek zoologists had found one hundred and fifty-three different kinds of fish and that John was symbolising the totality and range of the church's mission. Rupert de Dentz understood the hundred as referring to those who are married, the fifty to widows and the three to virgins!

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These allegorical interpretations amused the congregation of theology students but the climax of their laughter came when the preacher gave us his own explanation. John had written one hundred and fifty-three because that was the actual number of fish caught! Being a large catch, we were told, caught in such unusual circumstances, the disciples would naturally count the fish. They would jot down the number. One day, on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius, archaeologists might dig up something on which was written the number one hundred and fifty-three. The disciples needed to know the size of the catch so they could divide it between them. If only there had been one more fish, the disciples could have had twenty-two each. We could be confident that this was an historically accurate account.

The preacher had done his homework and held the congregation's attention. But his insistence on the accuracy of John's account and their laughter seemed to me to betray an unease with the results of his research.

Augustine, Jerome and Rupert of Dentz were probably as convinced as the student that the number was historically accurate. But the student was also aware that numbers often had symbolic meaning for biblical writers. It is unlikely, for example, that the student believed that the heavens and the earth had been created in seven days, or that the children of Israel had spent forty years in the wilderness, or that Methuselah lived nine hundred and sixty nine years. These numbers, he would have said, were symbolic. But whereas the

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earlier writers could hold together both a historical explanation and an allegorical interpretation of the numbers, the student was discovering that a symbolic account of the numbers tended to undermine an acceptance of them as historical fact. To establish the accuracy of the catch of the fish, the student found it necessary to make the allegorical interpretations look ridiculous. But in so doing, he turned what for the earlier interpreters was a rich source of symbolic meaning into a dry, meaningless historical fact.

Unfortunately for the preacher, biblical scholarship presented further difficulties in his attempts to dig out an historical account. In the commentaries, it is pointed out that there is a similar story in Luke's Gospel. It occurs before the resurrection and does not mention the number of fish. Is it likely that this event happened on two separate occasions? If not, which account is the original? And if Luke's account is original, has the number of fish given in John's Gospel been added by the author? And if so, has it been added for symbolic or historical reasons?

Raymond Brown's *Anchor Bible Commentary* devotes over fifteen pages to these questions. The student preacher, however, was unhappy to enter this debate. For him, the authority of the bible came from its witness to the historical events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and such a belief was not to be undermined by biblical scholarship.

It is an ironical situation. The rise of biblical scholarship was encouraged by the Protestant

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Reformers. While the interpretations of scripture by Augustine and earlier commentators were subject to the authority of the church, this was reversed by the Protestant Reformers. The church's teaching became subject to the authority of scripture. It was therefore important for them to establish what the bible said and what it meant when read without the prejudice of church dogma. But any hope that such study would dig down to solid foundations was frustrated by the fact that research seemed to unearth nothing but the shifting sands of scholarly debate.

The student faced further difficulties as he delved deeper into the texts. In the light of critical study, individual books of the bible were seen as different kinds of literature - history, story, myth, law, songs, gospel - each to be approached in an appropriate way. And within these, there were different strata of material - original accounts and editorial additions each with their own understandings of events and God. In his preaching, however, the student wanted to assert the unity of the bible and tell a common story from Creation and Fall to Incarnation and Redemption, from Old Testament prophecy to New Testament fulfillment. Biblical scholarship had a tendency to shatter the text into fragments.

The student also found that his biblical studies distanced him from Christians of the past. In the chapel where I heard this sermon, depicted in stained-glass, were the saints whose allegorical interpretations had caused so much amusement. Scholarship not only revealed that their methods were different from ours but also that their understanding and interpretations of scripture were

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different. What was true of the early church saints was true of the writers of scripture. They began to seem less like fellow pilgrims and more like strangers.

Perhaps with all these difficulties in mind, the preacher continued his sermon on a very different tack. It was as if he had decided to stop digging, abandon a "buried treasure" approach and adopt Hawkes' literary suggestion.

While the disciples are landing the huge haul of one hundred and fifty three fish, Peter hears that the stranger is the Lord, plunges into the sea and wades ashore. There on the beach is a charcoal fire. Peter, said the preacher, sees the fire and remembers warming himself beside another charcoal fire, denying that he knew Jesus. In his meeting with Jesus, Peter's past and his guilt is brought into the present. So it is with all who meet with Jesus.

The association was simply and powerfully made. We were not asked to consider whether there really was a charcoal fire. We were not asked to imagine archaeologists digging up the remains of a fire on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius. Here, too, the commentaries offer the observation that John alone refers to a charcoal fire. It is not mentioned in the other gospel accounts of Peter's denial nor in Luke's account of the fishing trip.

The gospel was now being read as a unified story and the preacher was using the imagery of the story to draw us into the drama to help us reflect on the story of our own lives.

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The sermon was inspiring but the tension between the two approaches to scripture remained. The presence of the charcoal fire could be argued for on literary grounds. It was a narrative device linking two episodes together. Perhaps there was a similar, literary explanation for the number of fish.

The fire and the fish are minor details, but the same approach can be applied to matters closer to the heart of the gospel story and the same consequence follows. Emphasis upon the literary explanation undermines the historical account. Indeed the more the text is treated as a literary whole and literary explanations are accepted for the way the text has come about, the harder it is to establish the historical case. From a literary point of view, trying to extract a historical backbone leaves the texts gutted.

For a faith that is grounded in historical events the decision to abandon a "buried treasure" approach would seem to be fatal. But leaving aside questions of history, what about the business of meaning and interpretation described in the Vatican II document as seeing "clearly what God wanted to communicate to us". Is Hawkes right when he says it is impossible to lay hold of an author's intentions? Is he right when he says there is no essential meaning embodied in the text and that we should abandon such a way of talking about a text?

I find a useful analogy in the world of music in the contrast between classical and jazz styles of performance. Unusually, I came across both these styles many years ago in a college chapel and its

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crypt. Downstairs in "The Cellar", *Crossculture*, an "international jazz fusion", was playing to a full house. The music was loud and while some members of the jazz club listened intently, others were drinking or smoking and trying to snatch a conversation. There was applause, whistles and shouts of approval as one improvised solo gave way to another.

Two hours earlier, in the college chapel, there had been a service of choral evensong. About thirty people were seated around the chapel and they rose in unison when the choir and clergy processed to their stalls and bowed to the altar. They stood or knelt as directed and remained silent, except when invited to join in a prayer or a hymn. Even a rapturous setting of the *Te Deum* by Herbert Howells was heard in solemn silence.

The contrast between the two events could not have been more striking. But what about the music? Were there two equally contrasting styles of performance, one free, improvisatory and self expressive, paying but lip service to the composition, the other making every effort to follow each nuance of the composer's intention in the written score?

The following day, browsing round the record shops, I noticed several performances of the *Te Deum* by Herbert Howells and a dozen versions of the jazz standards. Had I decided to buy one, how would I have chosen between them? Would I be looking for the same thing in the jazz recording and the choral piece? Again, it would seem that the

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difference between the jazz and the classical piece has to do with a composer's intentions. In looking for a good version of the Howells *Te Deum*, would I not be looking for an authentic performance, one which in some way was true to the composer's intentions? It would make little sense to look for an "authentic" improvisation.

And yet the idea of an authentic interpretation of a classical piece of music, true to the composer's intentions, makes less sense than at first appears. Howells's *Te Deum* was written for a choir of men and boys. Does that rule out performances by mixed choirs? Do the singers have to produce a sound like that of 'the choir of King's College, Cambridge in the 1940s for whom the piece was written? Do the tempo and dynamic markings have to be followed to the letter? Should the setting only be sung during the service of Mattins? We could make sure all these things were done and that a musicologist had read all the available archive material on Herbert Howells. Yet even then, could we be certain that this was how the composer would want his piece performed today?

In any case, if such intentions could be established what would give such a rendering any claim to be the better performance? On what grounds would musicians feel bound to interpret the piece accordingly? Such "authentic" interpretations might seem so strange to our ears as to leave us unmoved.

Now the musical analogy may seem irrelevant. The bible is not a piece of music but a book of words, words which have meanings, written by authors to

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convey those meanings. Indeed the Bible is the Word of God, making known his meaning for creation. Meaning is there to be dug out like buried treasure and polished with the methods of historical criticism.

But the search for an author's meaning turns out to be as elusive as the musician's dream of an authentic performance. Some of the biblical writers are unknown. Sometimes they are reporting the sayings of others. The earliest manuscripts are not always in the author's hand or in his own language. There are variations in the manuscripts. Even if all these difficulties are overcome, even if we knew the author and could decide between different versions, we still have no access to an author's pure unmediated thoughts. And if we had access to such unmediated thoughts, we would read them through our own assumptions, interests and prejudices. To discover the author's meaning would necessitate shedding all our own cultural presuppositions.

I suggest we let go of the idea that meaning is something buried in a text, expressing an author's intention. Hawkes' suggestion is that we generate meaning by our use of the texts. We use the texts for our own ends. In the case of music, adopting Hawkes' proposal means that I have to say that the college choir were not using their score in an attempt to be authentic but in the same way as their jazz colleagues downstairs. Down in the Cellar, making music was part of the whole, cultural activity of the jazz club. *Crosscurrents* performed to an audience which, through applause and shouts of encouragement, helped to make the music. As an

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"international jazz fusion", the players influenced each other in new ways. Making music was creating cross currents, sending waves through the jazz club, generating and reinforcing ideas as to what jazz was about.

The same interactive processes were happening upstairs in the chapel. The choir was taking part in the religious life of the college. The ritual shaped the music and gave it form. The choir's interpretation was influenced by previous generations of singers and brought new ideas as to the purpose of the college chapel and its music. Yes, upstairs and downstairs, performing music could be described not as a search for authenticity, or the expression of a composer's intentions, but as one of the central agencies for generating meaning within a particular cultural setting.

I argue that we see the reading and interpretation of texts as the making and giving of meaning to a particular group or society. And the Bible is to be seen not as a field in which to search for the buried treasure of its meaning but a field upon which to sow interpretative seeds. So let us say that the Bible is a means of shaping the church and making meaning in the world. Indeed if the Bible is but a field from which to dig out the author's meaning, once that treasure is found, the ground from which it has been extracted will have as much interest as the bran in a brantub. And for this reason, a "buried treasure" approach must, in the end, place less value on the text.

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I find myself facing three objections when I put this suggestion forward. The first is that it is said to lead to a culture where anything goes. Let go of the idea that there are fixed meanings intended by the author and there will be no limits to interpretation. But I think this criticism fails to recognise the nature of the artistic process. Jazz musicians do not play anything they like. As they perform, they are continually interacting with other players, their audience and with the community of musicians past and present. Directors and actors do not perform as they like, but have to negotiate their interpretation with their patrons, public and fellow performers. Interpretations and meanings evolve from a similar process of listening, interaction and negotiation. There may be times when there is a settlement in the negotiations but the conversation goes on. For there will not be seen to be any end, anyone true meaning to be discovered, only the continuing creative process of making meaning.

Such a process goes on within the church community and the theological faculty. I find it casts historical studies in a new and more positive light. It reveals the breadth of interpretation and uses to which biblical passages have been put throughout the church's history. Engaging with these inspires and tempers new possibilities in the same way that the music of the past inspires present composition. I do not find myself alienated from past generations of commentators by the strangeness of their interpretation. Rather I see them as engaged in the same task of using the bible to generate meaning.

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A second objection is that this approach may work for music but where there are words, there are meanings. Words cannot be made to mean whatever we like, otherwise we end up in a situation where communication is impossible. We become like Humpty Dumpty. "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean - no more, no less." This criticism, in part, relates to the notion that words get their meanings by referring to events and things in the world. Meanings take their shape from the world.

But the meanings of words are not fixed any more than the interpretation of plays. Meanings change and they too can be seen as coming from a process of interaction and negotiation. When my children were very young, they often made noises to which I had to respond. As an inexperienced parent, I would try a variety of responses to turn their cries into burbles. By trial and error, I usually found something that worked. The next time there was such a cry, I would try the same strategy. By such processes of interaction, we develop habits and responses to given sounds.

Meaning can be seen as a similar evolution of habits and responses. I still have to learn from my children that something 'wicked' is really rather good.

Meanings are the present habits and conventions of the use of language. The more habitual the usage, the more literary the meaning. Language is then seen not as a medium through which a meaning is conveyed but a tool for doing things.

The third objection, and perhaps the most serious, concerns God. If we adopt Hawkes' proposals then

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as we seek to make use of a text, we shall not be seeking a meaning placed there by the author. The author will have little authority in our use and interpretation of the text. What then happens to the authority of God in our reading of God's Word? As talk of the author and the author's intentions disappears into talk about our interpretation, so the authority of God, it is claimed, will become redundant in our reading of the bible.

My response to this argument is that God does not disappear. In one sense, my view of God is not changed at all. God remains the character in the stories of God. I engage with God as I engage with all the characters in the biblical stories. But also in that I no longer talk of meaning conveying a fixed author's intention, then in my reading of the bible, God becomes part of the creative, interactive, negotiating process of making meaning. God is not behind the text, artfully concealing his intentions for us to discover, but within the life of the community which seeks to use the bible in its generation of meaning.

My conviction to adopt a more improvisational approach to meaning is strengthened not only by the practical business of preaching but in studying the scriptures with others. So often when I was present at a bible study as a newly ordained priest, I was aware that my professional training inhibited people from talking about the bible. They felt that their interpretation might not be the right interpretation. But if we are convinced that the stories of our faith can cast light upon our lives and become our stories then we need to be free of the

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idea that there is only one meaning and one interpretation of them. Constant and creative re-interpretation keeps Shakespeare's play's alive. So it is with the scriptures.

My discipline during Lent is to give up preaching. I invite members of the congregation to preach. One year, I asked them to choose a parable which had been important for them. A wealth of imaginative interpretation and personal experience came from these sermons and, more importantly, put the scriptures firmly into the hands of the congregation.

There was a time when bibles were chained to lecterns. There have been times when priests were seen as the guardians and interpreters of scripture. We no longer chain bibles to the lectern and the scriptures are too valuable to be held and interpreted by one group of people. Freeing ourselves from imprisoning understandings of meaning liberates the creative process of bringing the scriptures alive.

## *History*

In writing the last chapter, I had to find out when Herbert Howells wrote his *Te Deum*. It did not take long to get hold of the information. I went to the library and with the help of the computerised index I was soon on the first floor writing down the details - Herbert Howells wrote the Canticles *Collegium Regale* in 1947.

But what had I got hold of? In my hand was a book open at the penultimate page. It was a book numbered M501.c.95.151. The reference number enabled me to find the book on the shelves and also placed Herbert Howells within the spectrum of classifications.

The fact I had hold of was but a sentence in an ordered collection of books. Walking past the stacks of books, going up and down in the lifts and accessing books through the index, was like taking a

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tour of human concerns art, literature, the humanities, music, science and religion. Finding the significance of one area simply meant exploring another. Here was the whole range of human knowledge in a building full of books.

But facts, it is argued, are more than sentences in books. They not only relate to other sentences, they make reference to the world outside. The illustrations, descriptions and theories in the library correspond to things outside. If we want to establish their truth and provide a foundation for our knowledge, we have to go outside and test them against the world. Whether it is the history of human communities or the history of the universe, we are dealing with facts, objects and events in the real world to which the texts refer. Without reference to these realities, our talk would be meaningless and there would be no knowledge and no truth. Knowledge and truth are established by reference to the real world "out there", by making connections between our words and the world through experience of touching things, feeling and examining them.

The problem with seeing things this way is that we can never escape from the library. We are always talking about the world using its classifications. We have no new words or categories. It is as if we are in constant touch with the library through the computer network. Still, to know a fact is to be able to talk about its place in a more general story.

Even when we talk about our sensual experiences, we are thrown back into the world of words and

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theories. Experience and language are too close to be able to separate them sufficiently to see if there is a correspondence. It is not like painting a landscape or a portrait where we can look round the picture to see if it is a good likeness. There we have space between the painting and the subject to make a comparison and see if it is a good representation. Between language and experience, there is no such space. We cannot escape from our language and see if it corresponds in detail with the world.

I suggest that we abandon a "correspondence" idea of truth. What are the consequences? First, we give up the idea that bits of the world match exactly particular bits of our language. A language teacher may hang labels on things in the classroom to help pupils learn a foreign vocabulary but different language teachers will label things with different words and in some languages there may not be a label to hang. A science teacher may label things differently again. The labels are determined by the particular language and disciplines and have a position in relation to the other labels.

Secondly, we give up the idea that our knowledge is grounded on an objective foundation. This is not to say there is no reality or that we do not experience reality, but it is to say that reality, experience and language are inseparable. They emerge together as time, space and matter are said to have emerged together at the very beginning of the Universe's Big Bang.

Thirdly, we abandon talk of "how things really are". At first, this suggestion may seem absurd. But

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establishing "how things really are" is not always a very fruitful exercise and need not be presented as an attempt to match things to an objective reality. On 31st October 1992, for example, BBC TV broadcast *Ghostwatch*. A presenter and a camera crew kept watch on what was described as one of the most haunted houses in Britain. As the evening's strange events unfolded, experts in the studio were interviewed by Michael Parkinson and responded to comments from the general public on a live phone-in.

From start to finish the programme was an elaborate fiction, a clever piece of drama. As the credits rolled up on a blacked out, demon-possessed studio, some viewers were laughing at the joke while others were telephoning the BBC in disgust and anger. *Ghostwatch* provoked a huge public response. Twenty thousand people were reported to have telephoned the BBC, some saying that they had suffered a nervous breakdown because of the programme, others that their children had been severely disturbed. The producers of the programme were in the dock.

In the debates which followed, those who believed in poltergeists made the complaint that the BBC was dabbling with dangerous occult powers. Those who did not believe in supernatural explanations were also complaining that the BBC had been irresponsible. They had subjected the most vulnerable members of society to fantasy and fear, by presenting fiction as fact and drama as documentary. But whether the BBC had been irresponsible was not going to be settled by

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establishing the objective reality of ghosts and evil spirits. Whether or not the house and its possessed family were a fiction was not the point. They were real for some viewers and people were claiming that they had suffered breakdowns and that their children had been traumatised.

The programme makers response was that the play was a serious attempt at a Halloween ghost story for today. If people had suffered, that was to be regretted. But was it really a result of the programme? Many people had enjoyed the evening's entertainment and if some had suffered, the real cause of the suffering was to be found in the lives of those vulnerable people. The producers had carefully observed the current safeguards. What more could they have done?

And so the debate went on. Each side put forward its arguments. One story was countered with another. Each emphasised that this was what really happened, these were the real motives and that was where responsibility really lay. But it was a debate. The truth of the matter was being decided by a process of discussion. It was a matter of putting a case forward and trying to win support for the argument.

Formal complaints might have been made to the BBC but the programme would have turned into a nightmare for the producers had a case been brought before the courts because of an injury suffered to a viewer. Here, too, in a more formal situation, establishing what was the case and where responsibility lay would have been a matter for

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debate. The case for the prosecution would have been presented and countered by the case for the defence. Evidence would have consisted of accounts by witnesses and the verdict would have been a decision as to which account was to be authoritative in forming the basis of future action or compensation.

I believe that this is a more useful way to talk about truth and knowledge, relating it not to a correspondence with an objective reality but to the state of our discussions. We can claim to have knowledge when we are able to achieve a broad measure of agreement. When it is harder to arrive at a common story, we talk of having opinions. When we talk of trying to get at the objective truth, we are wanting to get as much agreement as possible and when we feel there is no further need for discussion or justification, that is when we say that we have knowledge. Arriving at this point, we recognise that it is only the present agreement and at some time in the future, when someone comes along with new ideas, the case may have to be re-opened.

From this perspective, making a distinction between real and unreal is not very helpful. Saying that something is real does not tell us anything more of interest. The characteristics of a ghost are not altered by calling it real. It has the same power to frighten and disturb. And whether it is appropriate to talk of evil spirits in particular circumstances is not decided by calling them real. What is important is finding ways of talking that are useful to the community and establishing appropriate levels of

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agreement between the different ways we describe the world.

In some schools, pressure has been brought by evangelical groups to ban Halloween parties and stories about witches and ghosts. What is at stake is not the reality of such spirits. Of those who say they are real, some insist that they should not be dabbled with, others that they ought to be investigated. Of those who say they are not real, some will find them a useful and safe way to explore a child's fears, others that they are far too dangerous and frightening to use. What is important is whether such talk is helpful in a child's development and education and how we should relate such ideas to other ways of talking about the world.

There are three major areas where objections are raised to adopting this "non-correspondence" way of talking about truth and knowledge - areas to do with science, morality and faith.

In science, the objection is that it is not sufficient to say that scientists are finding useful ways of talking about the world. By their experimental method, it is claimed, they are making their theories more accurate descriptions of what the world is really like. Testing and probing the world enables them to mould their accounts to reality. And so, it is claimed, science works. It enables us to produce vaccines, computers, space probes and atomic weapons. How could this success be explained if there was not some degree of objective truth in the scientific account of the world? Our theories about the way the world works enable us to predict and

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control how things behave. Surely this demonstrates that those theories bear some resemblance to how things really are?

However, establishing this link between the achievements of science and an objective reality is extraordinarily difficult. It is not enough to say that a scientist has an idea and starts talking about gravity or electrons which leads to the development of new areas of research and technology. It is not even enough to show that various metaphors were in use at the time and influenced scientists to talk about the world in this different way from their predecessors. It has to be shown that gravity and electrons caused the scientist to think in these terms. It has to be shown that there is a particular method which somehow enables scientists to latch on to these realities in the world causing them to form particular theories.

But scientific theories appear to be very much like other human cultural achievements, very much a part of their particular age. The way one theory gives way to another seems very like the way one style of art becomes more predominant than another. Imagination and creativity seem to be as much a part of the scientific endeavour as logic and rational thought are a part of art. It just does not seem possible to isolate and identify what it is that scientists do that enables them to get a grip on objective reality and objective reality a grip on them. It does not seem necessary to talk about how things really are in order to explain the history of science.

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Equally it is hard to see why we should single out the ability to predict and control as being so important for knowledge. If this ability is taken as the sign that we have discovered how things really are, then it will tend to become the sole criteria for knowledge. It may, however, be more useful to stress other facets of inquiry: the ability to form opinions without force, for example, to have free and open encounter between those holding different beliefs from our own and to come to appropriate agreement with them.

This emphasis upon agreement, however, leads to the second major area of objection to abandoning a "correspondence" idea of truth, that of morality. Without an objectively real foundation on which to ground knowledge, how can we prevent a slide into a situation where anything goes, where one person's truth is as good as another's? On what grounds will we be able to combat the tyrannical regime or the racist group within our society? If such groups have come to a common agreement which is true for them and works for them, on what grounds can we argue against them?

The only ground on which we can argue against them is that of our own standpoint but this does not mean that we are forced into saying that one person's truth is as good as another. That in itself would be to claim some final truth about truth (namely that one's person's truth was as good as another's). What our community thinks it good to believe we may, from our desire for co-operation and common agreement, want others to share. We are free to try to persuade others that from their

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standpoint it would be useful to abandon certain practices. Seeking to relate truth to the communities in which we live rather than some nonhuman reality does not force us into silence. It encourages us to work for human solidarity.

Yet there still remains the question of a foundation for our ethics. What give us confidence to assert that our morality is any better than our neighbours? If we give up talking about an objective world on which to ground our language and theories, we also have to give up talking about an objective foundation for morality. Will a morality which is simply based on agreements be worthy of the name? Will it be possible to solve our ethical problems if we are not able to say that some things are in fact objectively right or wrong?

Just as we do not have to go back to some real objective foundation in the world to ground our science, so we do not need a similar foundation for ethics. In practice this is what happens. Many of our actions arise from a lifetime of acquired habits. We may rush to someone's aid without weighing up the consequences of our actions. Indeed we would think it rather odd if we did stop to calculate the risks in such emergencies. How we act in these circumstances will spring from the whole wealth of our experience.

Many people in their working life have to act in this way - wine tasters, translators, artists, actors, musicians and emergency service workers. They act from considerable experience and training. They have acquired an enormous background of

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examples which, over the years, have formed a complex network of interconnections. If they are asked why they acted in one way rather than another, they pick out a few points and examples from their experience. It is unlikely they would track back their explanation to some fundamental reasons. Giving a full, coherent and grounded account is not regarded as necessary in many fields of activity and is not necessary in morality.

Where public accountability is demanded, more justification may be required. But again, in practice, this does not need to be foundational and needs only ensure that the discussion and agreement is as wide as possible.

I have come to see all codes of conduct and laws, just as I now see all scientific theories, as the cultural products of particular societies.

They are the agreements of the day and we help to make such agreements for our use through processes of legislation. Similarly I see the constraints and pressures that bear upon us in our decision-making as coming from our upbringing, our society and the experiences we have lived through. And I see them as provisional, constantly being revised. It is this changing nature of morality which many find unacceptable.

On 2nd July 1990, the *Today* newspaper published the results of a MaRI survey on sin. The question was asked: "Here is a list of issues some people might think of as immoral or morally wrong. Which

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of them, if any, do you personally think are morally wrong?" The results were as follows.

<i>The use of hard drugs such as heroin</i>	89%
<i>Soccer hooliganism</i>	75%
<i>The use of soft drugs such as cannabis</i>	60%
<i>Scenes of explicit violence on television</i>	53%
<i>Having sexual relations with someone who is married to someone else</i>	52%
<i>Scientific experiments on human embryos</i>	52%
<i>Scientific experiments on animals</i>	50%
<i>Pornography in the cinema</i>	49%
<i>Homosexual relationships between consenting adults</i>	40%
<i>Full frontal male nudity on television</i>	39%
<i>Soft porn magazines in shops and newsagents</i>	38%
<i>Abortion</i>	35%
<i>Strip shows</i>	25%
<i>Having a child with a person you are not married to</i>	24%
<i>Euthanasia</i>	22%
<i>Capital punishment</i>	22%
<i>Topless page three girls</i>	21%
<i>Setting up sperm banks</i>	16%
<i>Couples living together who are not married</i>	13%
<i>Divorce</i>	11%

Accompanying the results in the newspaper was this comment.

*How times have changed. Sins, for the British today, just ain't what they used to be. Our grandparents found it easy to tell right from wrong ... simple morality was laid down in black and white. Sex outside marriage was clearly sinful and living together without being wed was unthinkable.*

*But in the Nineties, it is rare for a girl to be a virgin on her wedding day. Most young*

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*couples will live together before making the Big Commitment. And one in four children is born outside marriage without condemnation.*

The article went on to relate these statistics to belief in God.

*And despite everything, we still think of ourselves as a moral, God-fearing nation. More than 75 per cent say there is a God and almost seven out of ten believe in sin - although fewer than one in three think we will go to hell for it.*

The assumption of the article is clear. Morality is about avoiding sin. Sins are simple and clearly laid down. They are unchanging and particularly concerned with sex and keeping oneself pure. Morality is not primarily about producing a better world, living a more useful life or making something good. Morality is living by the rules, especially God's rules. If we keep to the rules and keep ourselves to ourselves, we shall not go far wrong. But having done all that, will we have begun to do anything useful, meaningful or worthwhile? The ethical project simply will not have begun. There is nothing in the survey to do with oppression, discrimination and victimisation. There is nothing about polluting the environment, wasting resources or defrauding people. Were these deliberately omitted from the list or did no one regard them as sinful?

By contrast, if we adopt the idea that ethical rules are provisional and can change, we shall be better equipped to cope when facing new and difficult

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moral decisions. In the field of medical ethics, talk of right and wrong is far from helpful. Should a very severely handicapped baby be kept alive at all costs or allowed to die with dignity? Should one be able to hasten death to ease suffering and pain? The sheer complexity of these questions, and the emotional trauma anyone facing them endures, forbids us from talking in simplistic terms about right and wrong. These decisions have to be made through patient discussion with as many interested parties as possible until a consensus is reached.

With no objective foundation to establish our values, value will have to be given to people and things by us. We shall not see them as having an objective value in themselves but rather they will be seen as valuable and meaningful only in so far as we give them value in our talking and actions. The responsibility is upon us actively to seek out the perceived injustices of our day and create better relationships within our world.

We shall also need to revise our idea of moral progress. Looking at the history of art, we may be content to talk of artists working in different styles without feeling the need to look for some sort of aesthetic progress. But in looking at history, people do often feel the need to talk about moral progress. They declare that in the twentieth century we are much more moral than previous ages. A comparison with the barbarism of the past may give the impression that slowly we are becoming more civilised and more moral. Others assert the very opposite. Ray Billington in *Living Philosophy* gives two examples to make the point. The first might

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suggest that, over time, humanity has evolved to a morally better state:

Twentieth century top people  
(morally mature)  
|  
The Roman Empire  
(civilised but not very)  
|  
Cave men (& women)  
(unspeakable)

The second series suggests the opposite:

Nazi Germany  
|  
The Renaissance  
|  
Classical Athens

We do not need this idea of progress in morality. Where morality is seen as arising from the agreements of the day, progress in morality will be seen as enlarging the circle of our concerns, recognising the pain of people in circumstances very different from our own and co-operating more widely to alleviate those sufferings. In short, as increasing our sense of human solidarity.

This leads us into the third major area of objections to a "non-correspondence" view of truth, raising questions to do with the reality of God and salvation. Just as science is seen from an objective point of view as seeking to get ever nearer to a perfect representation of the world, so in classical

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Christianity faith sees itself as getting ever nearer the perfect state of grace. In the Christian story, that perfection was seen at the beginning of creation, in the Garden of Eden. Since the Fall, those who believe are, through Redemption, destined to rediscover the perfections of Eternal Life in heaven. Now they see through a glass darkly. For the moment, they must seek to imitate, as closely as possible, the way of Christ, and to see the world transformed into the Kingdom of God, the likeness of heaven on earth. But if we abandon the idea of overall moral progress and a real heaven, how can there be any notion of salvation? Furthermore, If we are not going to allow talk of relating our theories to an objective reality beyond them, then what becomes of our knowledge of God? Is God to become a cultural creation?

And what then happens to the reality of God?

Before addressing these questions in a later chapter, it is worth pausing to note that a more pragmatic view of truth can produce a profoundly religious vision of life. If the quality of our negotiations and agreements determines the state of our knowledge, then our reality and our human relating are inseparably bound together. Knowledge and truth become ethical and political, dependent upon our negotiating skills and whether it is in research, business or peace negotiations, in the laboratory, the board room or parliament, how things are and how things should be are fused together. Truth and goodness are met together.

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From a "non-correspondence" view of truth, our language is seen as metaphorical through and through and is kept alive by the continual creation of new figures of speech. At first our metaphors have the power to open up all kinds of new possibilities, but as they become familiar and bed down through habitual use into fixed meanings, so new metaphors are needed to open up new avenues for our thinking. Our horizons are forever expanding. It is sometimes said that the best scientific theories are the ones that open up the most possibilities for further research. A non-realist view of knowledge does not look forward to the day when the whole of our understanding can be derived from a single, simple equation but looks forward to the possibility of doing more interesting things and becoming more interesting people in a more interesting world. In this way the imitation of God is taken to the limit as the responsibility of creating and sustaining our world is put "into the creative processes of our language, discussions and agreements. And in this creativity all things are continually renewed.

## *Self*

An Englishman's home is his castle. So too it seems are his school, university and church. It is not just that they look like castles. My bishop, the Bishop of Leicester, Tom Butler, began one response to the *Heart of the Matter* programme, with this description of the church.

Imagine a country. At its centre stands a splendid castle. The castle is strong, firmly built, impressive in its solidity and its majesty. It dates back thousands of years but it is still inhabited by people for whom it provides a secure home. They are proud of their castle and its tradition, and enjoy living there.

Around the castle spreads the countryside. Nearby, the great keep dominates the view everywhere, but the further one travels the less clearly visible it becomes. Indeed, towards the borders the castle occasionally seems to vanish from sight altogether. These border regions are bleak and inhospitable

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tracts, yet some people enjoy the bracing atmosphere of the unknown, and spend much of their time and energy exploring here; and these people too owe allegiance to the lord of the castle.

*Well, in reality this country is no fairy tale land. It is in fact one way of looking at the church - and a way I find particularly helpful when thinking of the Church of England. (Diocese of Leicester News and Views, June 1992)*

As a child and later a young man, locked on to an educational treadmill, I went from school to university, back to school again (this time as a teacher) and on to theological college. The image of grand architectural buildings, castles and towers is a powerful and compelling one. It not only shaped these institutions, it shaped me in my development from a shy child to an uncertain adolescent and eventually to a confident adult.

In those early days of childhood, I had a view of myself as a king in a castle, safe within an impregnable keep. Venturing beyond the castle walls, meeting and getting to know people was daunting, so I spent many introspective hours within my castle, amusing myself and imagining the experiences which lay in the "bleak and inhospitable tracts". Many of these imaginings were worked out at the keyboard. I would sit for hours at the piano or organ, using music to live out my fantasies and fears. I had little idea of how to practise. Frustration at falling short of my goal often resulted in destructive outbursts and I became quite adept at

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mending broken hammers with wood glue and sticky tape!

My faith was also a private affair. Encouraged by a Sunday school teacher who was determined to be a priest, I began reading one chapter of my Gideon bible every day and also using some form of daily prayer. I kept the habit up for many years without telling anyone. I remember listening surreptitiously to Bach's *St Matthew Passion* on the radio one Good Friday, my ear pressed close to the set, so that no one else in the house could hear. Faith was an inward and turbulent affair conducted alone within myself, my castle.

Later I attended a theological college which on a dark night looked more like Dracula's castle than an educational establishment. It had high walls with towers and battlements and bats flew in and out of the belfry. The huge gates were closed early in the evening and forgetting the key to the back gate meant scrambling over the wall to get in. Many Cambridge colleges are built to a similar design and attending tutorials I used to stoop through a small wicket door in the imposing college gates which were rarely open.

Of course, there was a downside to this egotistical view of myself. Castles and towers have other connotations besides security and refuge. Historically, castles were not only palaces but prisons. So my safe world, my castle of which I was undisputed king, except perhaps for Bach or Beethoven, was also a place of barren and lonely

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confinement. There was a desperate need to break out, to form relationships, to love and be loved.

It wasn't Joshua's trumpets which brought down the walls of my Jericho. It was not a matter of breaking down the walls and coming out of my castle but of getting rid of that whole imprisoning picture of the self. But changing the picture of the self affects two other vital relationships, our relationship to the body and our relationship to time.

First the body. The castle image of the self presents a picture of the self at home in the body. "Is anyone there?" we ask when someone puts on a vacant expression. The glint in the eye and the expression on the face are like flags flying above the battlements indicating that the self is in residence in the body. Not until death is the self said finally to vacate the body.

We are so used to thinking of ourselves in this way it is hard to imagine any other. Going to view the body of a friend prepared for burial, the overwhelming conviction is that this is not the person we knew so well. The warmth, personality, spirit, mind and consciousness of our friend has gone. I first saw a human corpse during my theological training. A friend and I spent a week working with a hospital chaplain. Our course included a visit to the mortuary. The attendant made the most of his opportunity to embarrass two nervous ministers in training. With a great sense of drama, he uncovered the body of a man in his late seventies and took great delight in pointing out various discolourations on the skin and other anatomical details before

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producing an electric cutter. "You tell me," he said, "You're supposed to be the experts. Where is he?" We had no answer. "Well he's not here, else I wouldn't be doing this," he said, starting up the cutter. We left.

Walking away, searching for an answer and trying to keep my mind off spilt blood and shattering bones, I remembered a passage describing the death of Socrates. He was tried and condemned to death for heresy and corrupting the minds of the young. According to Plato's account, Socrates' disciples gather round as he prepares to drink the poison. Crito is anxious to fulfill his master's last requests.

*"How shall we bury you?" he asks. "Any way you like" replied Socrates "that is if you can catch me and I don't slip through your fingers." He laughed gently as he spoke and turning to us went on: "I can't persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now and marshalling all the arguments; he thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead; and asks how to bury me! As for my long and elaborate explanation that when I have drunk the poison I shall remain with you no longer but depart to a state of heavenly happiness, this attempt to console both you and myself seems to be wasted on him."  
(Plato, *Phaedo*)*

For Plato, the soul - the essence of our humanity - was immortal, unchanging and indestructible in contrast to the body which is subject to death and decay. The soul and the body each has its own home

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in a separate world. However, for the few years of our earthly lives, our souls take up residence in our bodies, determining all our thoughts and actions until finally being released at death.

Now while this way of talking about the self may have helped me to come to terms with the post-mortem, there were other aspects of Plato's account which were far less helpful. Plato encouraged his pupils to disregard their bodies. They were temporary homes of no lasting value. His pupils were therefore to abstain from physical and sexual pleasures, free themselves from the distractions of the senses and avoid, as much as they could, all physical contacts and associations. Indulging the physical was not only a distraction from the eternal things of the soul. The purity of the soul was at risk. It was important to keep the soul unspoiled by the impurities of the world. This was not an understanding of the self likely to appeal to a young, newly-married ordinand discovering himself through the joys of his sexuality.

Images of the self as a soul in a body, a heavenly resident in an earthly home or a king in his castle - all these images I now find unhelpful for another reason. Seeing the self as something present or absent in the body also affects our relationship to time. I first became aware of this reading the *Confessions* of St Augustine. I was at university at the time and had become quite serious about a girlfriend. It was the end of term and I faced a long journey home. Parting from her was painful and it was to be several weeks before I would see her again. The thought of not seeing her, not hearing the

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sound of her voice was unbearable. I killed time on the train reading the *Confessions*. The descriptions of his youth when "love and lust together seethed within me", the expressions of guilt and the joy of conversion struck a chord in me. But what strikes me now is an extraordinary meditation on time.

*What, then is time? If no one asks me I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me I do not know. Yet I say with confidence that I know that if nothing passed away there would be no past time; and if nothing were still coming there would be no future time; and if there were nothing at all there would be no present time.*  
(Augustine, *Confessions* ch XIV)

I skipped rapidly over these chapters. They seemed like a curious, philosophical aside. Now they seem much more important to the question of how we picture the self. Augustine, in his analysis of time, suggests that neither the past nor the future exist since "the past no longer is and the future has not yet come to be". Only the present exists and things only exist in the present.

So, for Augustine, to be a presence in the world is to be in the present, to be here, now, and therefore the passing of time, the continual movement of the present from the past to the future, continually threatens our existence. We shall only avoid this threat to our existence, when we escape the passing of time.

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On my solitary journey home at the end of term, feeling withdrawn after parting from my girlfriend, I would have agreed to all this. When she and I were together "time stood still" and we "lost all sense of time". It seemed like the moment would go on for ever, as if we had stepped out of time into eternity. But without her, time dragged and I was miserable and did not know what to do or who I was. I was plunged back into time. The daily routines were a burden and everyday life seemed dull and lifeless. I dwelt in the past and longed for the time when we would be together again. To stir myself out of this lethargy and stop myself dwelling on the past, I would keep telling myself to live and lose myself in the present.

A castle image of the self makes it difficult to live in time and is threatened by time and change. Later when I studied the philosopher Descartes who also saw the human self as being in two parts - the essential rational, conscious mind and the mechanical body - I found the same difficulty in accepting historical change and the passing of time. For him the processes which enable us to mature are corrupting. Ancient cities, he says, which have taken shape over time are ill laid out in comparison to new towns. So too our reasoning, he claims, would be far better had we been mature at birth. Childhood is a time when we acquire a thousand prejudices. In short the rational human mind would be far better out of time.

So the journey of the self, pictured as a heavenly soul in an earthly body, is a journey from earth to heaven, from our time to God's time.

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When I show children around our church, I take them on that journey. We start at the lych-gate associated with death and the funeral service. We pass through the graveyard, the resting place of the dead, and past the gargoyles warding off the evil spirits until we arrive in the safety of the church. There the roof is held up with angels, and moving through the nave and up a step, we come to the chancel where ministers and choristers dress like angels. Up further steps, we come to the sanctuary, the holiest place, where candles burn, where God is present in bread and wine and where an altar rail with gates keeps all but the priest and servers out.

It is a journey out of the world, out of the body and out of time. Of course, in the liturgies, the people are sent in the power of the Holy Spirit back out into the world. But there remains this dissatisfaction with the world, the body and the passing of time.

I argue for an image of the self which is rooted in the body and the passing of time. Its motto is not "live in the present" but "go with the flow". Free of the image of a centred, unified self, safe within in its castle, the flow of time generates the energy for living. As Samuel Avital, the mime artist, wrote:

*A true religion can teach us how to leap from space into time, where God is found.*

Finding a new image of the self was a long process but it was a conversion that affected all aspects of my life. For several years I gave up playing the piano and organ. As a music teacher in a comprehensive school, the classical repertoire seemed of little use in

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the classroom. As an ordinand, the tradition of Anglican church music was rapidly being overtaken by new worship songs. My music just did not seem to be anyone else's and I no longer felt the need to work out my frustrations at the keyboard. But then occasionally, I would be asked to accompany a singer or an instrumentalist, to conduct a choir or play for a sing-song. I worked in a church with a strong musical tradition and as a precentor of a cathedral. I began to discover myself through the joy of making music with others.

Intellectually, I had a similar journey to make. At my first New Testament tutorial I presented an essay on the relationship between the first three gospels - what is known in the trade as the Synoptic Problem. I had put a lot of effort into the essay and sat in stunned silence as my tutor tore it to shreds. But he was a good teacher and over the next few weeks, I was coaxed into discussion and argument. I began to realise that he expected us to do theology together, to talk and argue. I ended up with the highest marks in my year on that paper but more importantly, I learnt that theology was a communal exercise. And now, as a teacher, I recognise that the best lessons are those where insights emerge through joint exploration. I don't see myself as imparting knowledge but encouraging people to engage in theological discussion.

Through this long process, I have ended up with a different picture of the self. Rather than seeing myself as the king of the castle, I now see myself as scattered throughout my relationships and activities with other people. No doubt I still have a long way

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to go on my journey towards maturity but it is no longer hindered by an unhelpful view of the self. Just as I do not find it helpful to talk of one, essential true meaning buried in a text, so I no longer look for a real, unified me hidden deep within. To talk of Hamlet or Lear is to talk of all the productions and interpretations scattered across time. To talk about myself is to talk about all the relationships that form me. Now, for me, there is no castle, no wall, no soul within the body, only a network of relationships, communication and activity which give rise to my individuality, my place in the world. Before I saw myself as already created, hidden, buried even within. Getting to know myself was a process of unearthing that buried soul. Now, I see myself as created and re-created within the communities to which I belong as Hamlet is created and re-created in the interplay of production.

In other words, the process has been reversed. Before I set out from within the castle. I looked for myself within its walls and then sought to lower the drawbridge and make excursions into the borderlands. Now the start is with the flow of conversation and communication, with the language and culture of the communities which now and again throw up moments of self-reflection and individuality. I no longer see myself as the private home of an individual self but a public space within the community. Before the self was to be discovered in private. I knew myself better than anyone. Indeed I was the only person who could know me. Now I realise that others can read my thoughts and know me better than I know myself.

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But this change of self-image and reversal of the process of becoming myself has taken place while I have been working within a church which is pictured as a castle by its bishops and which perpetuates an unhelpful view of the self. The radical change it brought to my spiritual and prayer life does not always sit comfortably within that institution.

From the very beginning my daily reading of the bible was accompanied by daily prayers. At university, the evangelical Christian Union arranged all manner of prayer meetings and partnerships. We encouraged each other to talk about our most personal concerns before praying for each other. They were emotionally charged times, cycles of guilt, confession and the binding proclamation of redemption. We prayed to a God "to whom all hearts were open and all desires known". The responsibility for every infringement of God's law was ours. The only way to be free of the guilt was through the church's ritual of forgiveness. The only way to qualify for the forgiveness was by binding ourselves to the church. The more we were bound to the church, the more we were made aware of our miserable sinfulness. Confession was a big part of my prayer life and this cycle of guilt and confession led to obsessive and addictive relationships. Now it seems thoroughly unhealthy and I am less concerned with guilt and attempts to attribute blame.

Now I put the emphasis in prayer on responsibility. I do not examine my reasons and motives in order to attribute blame but to be more responsible.

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Relationships break down, discussions fail and things do not work out. That is when I need a sense of responsibility and a desire to do whatever possible to restore communication, to put things right, bear the cost of the consequences and prevent a repetition of the action. And seeing myself as a network of relationships, this has to be done through those relationships. It is both an individual and a community exercise.

My perception of intercessory prayer has also changed. The most common questions that I am asked about prayer are about intercession. "Who do I pray to?" and "What do I pray for?" These can presume a needy, unified, spiritual self communicating with the spiritual being of God. Not having that picture of the self, the question for me is "Who do I pray with?" Being in the communion of those with whom I make music, sense, love and peace, my prayer begins with these holy communions in which I live and move and have my being.

Prayer used to begin with me, my desires, my thoughts and thanksgivings. Now it begins with the community. It is a reflection upon society and the relationships within it. Prayer does not start with need and it does not start with myself. It starts with the flow of the community spirit.

Visiting is an extension of this prayer. As a young curate I would visit people, talk with them and get to know them. But there was always an ulterior motive. I would be thinking, what can I do for them, what can the church do for them? It was not long

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before I realised that this placed a barrier between us. I visited people who were quite content with their lives, or for whom nothing could be done, people who were dying and content to die. And I felt uncomfortable with them and about them.

But changing the image of the self changed the vision of what I was about. Visiting was not a meeting of two selves, one in need of the other's help, but a strengthening of community and a recognition of our mutual interdependence. And this for me is now the beginning and end of intercessory prayer.

For a Church of England priest, however, this spirituality and vision of prayer can be hard to maintain. Most of the public rituals are laid down and enshrined in law and to make them creative and communicative requires skill and ingenuity. Even then it is not always possible. Sometimes the words of the services are like imprisoning habits that develop in a marriage, stifling open communication and creativity. In such cases, creative liturgy has to canyon outside the church or the law has to be broken. At their best, established liturgies are like the classics and performing them can be continually challenging.

But the more I appreciate the creativity in them, the more I want to be creative in liturgy myself. The central act of worship of the Christian church tells the story of a man who with breath-taking imagination saw in the traditional passover ritual something to do with his impending death and made it his own. "This is my body" he said. "This is

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my blood. Do this in remembrance of me". How can we claim to follow this man unless in taking bread and wine we use our own words to make these actions relate to our communities and ourselves? Until the church allows far more creativity in worship, it will never nourish a more creative image of the self.

Of course the church does make attempts to revise its liturgies. But anyone who has sat in the public gallery, watching members of the General Synod debating, for example, additional eucharistic prayers for services where children are present, will have realised that it is an utterly ridiculous process that does nothing to encourage local churches to be creative. Churches of other denominations do encourage imaginative ritual and it is happening outside the churches too. The Unitarian Church has produced a wealth of eucharistic services. The British Humanist Association has been encouraging people to celebrate the birth of children and marriages in creative ceremonies. It also offers practical help to those who want to arrange non-religious funerals.

I have been involved in helping people to organise such ceremonies. Some describe themselves as atheists and are anxious not to have any kind of religious ritual. Others are simply keen to express their thoughts and feelings through words, poetry and music. The experience of helping people to create their own ritual celebrations can be profoundly moving and challenging. The couple who wanted to mourn their stillborn child came by themselves to the crematorium. We chose a poem

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expressing the hopes that are raised during a pregnancy, hopes for wisdom and responsibility and a better world to bring a child up in. I then summed up their hope that the vision which had grown over nine months would not be wasted but would stay with them as a lasting memorial of their daughter.

If the self is created within community, in its rituals, language, stories and relationships then those communities need to be vibrant and creative. And if the church is to become a community which enables more creative and communicative selves, then it must become more creative in its relationships and rituals. It has to become more like an art school or a musical composition class where students explore the traditions and techniques of the past and are encouraged to forge their own artistic styles. When I was at school, we had a text book called *The Technique of Composition*.

If we followed the rules in the book, we produced imitation Palestrina or Bach and the teacher praised our compositions. I became skilled at mimicking all manner of composers. It came as quite a shock to have composition classes with a living composer and be forced to develop my own style and ideas. Undoubtedly I learned a great deal from studying the techniques of other composers but artistic development goes a stage further.

And the church must embrace creative relationships. Many such life-enhancing relationships are not accepted by the church. There is holy communion between homosexuals as between heterosexuals, unmarried couples as well

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as married, between unattached friends as between life-long partners. A community which can accept the rich variety of human relationships is joyfully enriched.

Ultimately the church is reluctant to cast off the image of the self as a soul in body because to accept a new image of the self demands a revision of God and our own ultimate destiny. For God too is spoken of in personal terms and how we speak of ourselves will affect the way we speak of the person of God. For me, to speak of a personal God is not to speak of one who graciously descends from his heavenly dwelling place to reveal himself in our world. God, as person, has leapt from space into time and like all people is dispersed through the flow of community relationships. To speak of the person of God is to speak of the stories of God throughout time.

And in the end, a new image of the self demands a revision of our own ultimate destinies. The Egyptian Pharaohs mummified their bodies and entombed them in the pyramids along with everything else they thought would be needed for the after-life. I have no wish to be buried nor to live my life preserving myself for some future state. When I die, I hope my ashes will be scattered, for that symbolises the way I try to live and the image I have of myself as dispersed in time. Like Paul, I want to say that I have already died with Christ and now live the risen life.

Many of these themes come together at funerals. In the books on preaching at funerals I have from college days, there are sermon outlines dwelling on

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the eternal truths of the gospel, the love of God, the suffering of Jesus and the hope of resurrection. Some emphasise the eternal source of all goodness, love, patience and long-suffering. To these outlines the preacher is expected to add some account of the individual's life. But the addition is not easy to make. To concentrate on individuals is to speak of the changes and chances of their lives, to paint a picture of what makes them unique and interesting, to speak of their influence for good or bad and how they were of their time and society.

Where possible, I try to tell the story of the deceased's life or encourage a friend or member of the family to do so. For we are made in the telling of our stories. Seeing people as living in the flow of time is to see the peculiar circumstances of their upbringing and the things that happen to them and the things they do. They are the stories of their lives and part of our mourning is to tell and retell those stories as we leap from seeing them as souls and bodies to seeing them as beings in time.

Words which continue to inspire me in my exploration of the self are found in the Communion Service. Bread is taken and a prayer of thanksgiving offered. It is then broken and distributed to the people. This action and the words that are spoken express the intricate relationship between the self, the community and the body.

*We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. Though we are many we are one body because we all share in the one bread.*

**SELF**

Though we are many, we are one body.

## *God*

**W**hen I've been interviewed the first two questions have often been these. Do you believe in God? Yes. So do you believe God is a being, a real objective being, a supernatural person?

The previous chapters of this little book form part of an answer to that second question, exploring phrases like "a person" and "a real, objective being". So, for example, I argued that when I talk about myself I don't find it helpful to say that I discover myself by peeling away the layers in a search of a hidden soul, the real me. Rather I become myself by embracing the roles and communities in which I live and work. I find it more helpful to see myself as scattered throughout my relationships and activities with other people. In a similar way, I argued that I don't find it helpful to talk about meaning as if it were something buried in a text by the author and

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has to be unearthed like buried treasure. Meaning, truth and knowledge are explored through the discussions, negotiations and agreements of our communities.

Beauty, for me, is not something in the music, but an aspect of the music's place in the life of the listener, performer and culture.

The common theme is that of a change from trying to focus on a single, hidden concentrated point to that of embracing the life of a community. That theme forms a familiar part of the Christian story in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, re-enacted in the breaking and distribution of bread. Where is the power of God to be found? In the fellowship of the community of the Spirit, the Body of Christ. In a similar way, sovereign power is seen not by focussing on the mystique of an individual monarch but in the use of the powers given to each citizen through the variety of democratic processes.

From this perspective then, an exploration of God is an exploration of the community of God, an exploration of its work and worship. An exploration of belief goes hand in hand with an exploration of the practice of faith.

Children quickly learn that belief and practice go hand in hand. It is part of their fun and games. Not wanting to be caught out, they watch carefully for the tell-tale signs of a practical joke. To avoid being the April Fool requires keen observation. Is something out of the ordinary going on? Are people acting suspiciously? Can what they are saying be

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believed? To succeed in making the teacher the fool demands a similar, careful control of behaviour. Act naturally. Stay relaxed. Don't giggle.

Similar observation is needed to catch out dare-devils. "Go on then", my friends and I would say to the boy who boasted that he was not afraid to walk through the graveyard in the dark. But he looked frightened and started making excuses and ran a mile when we jumped out at him at night. We didn't believe him. Seeing was believing.

Magic was a good way to learn the vital lesson that belief and practice go hand in hand. For just a few years, magicians seemed to possess extraordinary powers. All they had to say was "Abracadabra" and things vanished. A wave of the wand and they reappeared. But it was not long before we were asking to see how it was done, accusing the magician of cheating. And when we bought conjuring sets and books on magic the secrets were revealed. The magic was gone and the unbelievable became believable. Knowing how was believing.

None of this was any use when it came to religious belief. It was no good looking at the world, I was told. You could not tell by an examination of the way the world worked whether people were right to believe in God. Nor was it any good looking at the believers themselves. They were not necessarily any better than the rest of us. Even if they were good and went to church, that in itself did not mean they were real believers. Indeed it seemed that any kind of testing or observation was out of the question.

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God was not to be put to the test and could not be observed.

God's ways were mysterious. Belief and practice were torn apart when it came to religious faith and God remained the magician whose word brought the world into being and whose powers could perform miracles. Belief was unbelievable.

Of course, as children we were quite familiar with a world where belief and practice were separated and where some questions were simply not answered. But in the world of make-believe, we were still determined to know how things were done - how the animals learned to talk and how gingerbread houses stood up to the rain - even knowing that we would have to make up the answers for ourselves. We looked with contempt upon the adult who said "Well that's just how it is. It is only a story. You shouldn't ask questions like that". We were determined to make the world of make-believe believable.

Even at the simplest level, belief and practice go hand in hand. Even to say "I believe it's raining" has to be put into the context of some action or procedure or situation to give it meaning. If asked what I mean when I say "I believe it's raining", I respond by saying that if I went outside I would get wet or if I looked out of the window I would see spots on the pavement. I make an assertion, commit myself to a procedure. Different beliefs are linked to the objects of belief by different procedures and if we want to see whether someone really believes, we look to these practices.

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Faith is the same. Without a context of practice, religious belief becomes meaningless and turns faith into the whim of a virtually-real God. Belief becomes a simple acceptance of the magical truth of the Gospel and if I do not accept the truth or if I find it difficult to accept, there is not a lot to be done. The argument is sometimes presented like this. There are some facts, supernatural facts, which must indeed be facts if faith is to be true. If they are not facts then faith is a fantasy. We cannot believe in God unless we first believe there is a God to believe in. We cannot pray to God unless we believe there is a God to pray to. Faith stands or falls by belief in the fact of God.

But these statements are deceptive. They attempt to separate faith and the practice of faith by suggesting that there are two stages: first the acceptance of certain facts of faith and second, the response to these expressed in the practice of prayer, worship and appropriate action.

The first stage makes no sense for, unless a belief is set within the context of practice, we simply have no way of knowing what it means. "What do you mean," we might ask "by saying you believe in the fact of God?" Until this statement is expanded in terms of the sorts of things it leads believers to do, we have no idea what is being talked about.

With regard to the second stage - the response to these supposed facts of faith expressed in the practice of prayer, worship and appropriate action - the implication is that while faith ought to bring about such a response and bear certain fruits, it

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does not necessarily do so. One person might believe and respond in worship and action, another might choose not to do so. Yet believers do not want to say this. It is not the way they want to talk about belief in God. If someone says "I believe in God but I couldn't care less" we would say this person does not know how most people use the words. They do not understand the grammar of God. They do not really believe. We can say "I believe it's raining, but I couldn't care less" but the grammar of God is quite different.

Faith and the practice of faith are necessarily linked. To believe is to be immersed in the practice of belief. When I say "I believe in God", I am talking about the context of my believing. God is the environment of my believing. I believe in God. To read the stories of faith, to re-enact them in the rituals of the faith community and live through them is precisely what I mean by saying I believe in God. To believe is to be baptised into the community of faith whose language and rituals create and re~ create us. There, in the community of faith, we are in the midst of our creator. There we live and move and have our being.

Sometimes I am challenged by critics who begin by saying "We think you're quite a good chap, indeed not a bad vicar. But it's a pity you hold such beliefs". When I suggest that I am the person I am because of my faith and that faith makes a difference to a believer's life, they look rather startled and begin to take back their remarks. Perhaps I'm not such a good chap after all!

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When people come to faith, they talk about their lives changing, about becoming new people, re-born and re-created. For them, there is not only a new vision but a new world. As they read their scriptures and join in worship, so they begin to see themselves differently. A faith which makes no difference is not a faith in God. So unless faith and the practice of faith are bound together, it is quite impossible to say that God is at work in people's lives. There is no way to say that an action or way of life is the result of God working in their lives. Recently, some London churches have been witnessing a phenomenon which has been called the Toronto blessing. The church leaders, having visited churches in Toronto, found that members of their congregations were falling down in the aisles and laughing uncontrollably. It provoked a great deal of discussion as to whether this was mass hysteria or a blessing from God. In such cases the argument focuses on the effects. The experiences are said to be from God according to whether the practices are acceptable to the church. In so far as the practice is seen as part of the tradition of the church or can be allowed to become part of its practice, it is said to be of God's Spirit. To believe is to bear fruit, the particular fruit of faith and God is at work where such fruit is being born.

This is fine, people say, when things are going well. What happens when we are in trouble? Where is the comfort and help in this believing? How can it address and provide a solution for the real evils in the world? Real evils need a real, objective God. The case was put strongly by Bishop Michael Marshall in a response to Anthony Freeman's *God in Us*.

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Writing in the *Church of England Newspaper*, he describes the reported rescue of a man about to commit suicide by leaping to his death from a suspension bridge. A teacher, herself a mountaineer and parachute enthusiast, ran on to the bridge. "Your life is too precious please don't do it" she is reported to have said. "Tell me your problems; I'll help you sort them out." After two hours and a joke about tying elastic to his ankles to make a bungee jump together, the man finally left the parapet and climbed back on to the bridge where he and his rescuer hugged and cried in each other's arms.

Commenting on *God in Us* in the light of this incident, Michael Marshall writes:

*Nice people in the nice world of sunny Sussex might get by without the crude particulars of a revealed faith and the need for a Saviour. But if Anthony Freeman had ever been literally or metaphorically on to that "suspension bridge" of despair like anyone who has been to the edge of the pit of self-destruction he would know that in those situations I need more than the resources of my own shoe straps to draw me up from that pit, back into the land of living.*

*I need a teacher who is also a saviour who objectively exists and who is willing to come from outside of the problem enter into it, and risk the bungee jump of love, tied to the likes of me. Otherwise there ain't no good news "out there" after all.*

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*(Church of England Newspaper, 10th  
September 1993)*

It is a curious statement. Someone in trouble needs the sort of person described in the report. The man on the suspension bridge does not try to pull himself up with his own shoe straps but has the help of another human being. And to the extent that I am in need, I need just such a person to help me. But Michael Marshall seems to suggest that more is needed, for we are all, as it were, hanging from the suspension bridge of life. Each human being and the human race, as a whole, needs a Saviour.

This belittles the woman who helped bring the man down from the parapet of the bridge for it suggests that the man is no better off after his rescue. If the whole human race is hanging from the suspension bridge of life, so too is the man's rescuer. His rescue was an illusion. So why did she bother? Divorcing faith and the practice of faith devalues ordinary human achievement. Far better, the prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours; ours are the eyes through which he is to look with compassion on the world; ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; and our the hands with which he is to bless us now.*

So for me, Christ is alive in the world in so far as faith is being practised, in so far as people are being rescued. If no one practises such faith, it will be meaningless to talk of Christ being alive. But this is

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what is most unacceptable to so many people. They feel a boundary of belief has been crossed. Richard Harries, the Bishop of Oxford, in his introduction to *The Real God - a Response to Anthony Freeman's God in Us* accuses him of saying

*If the world was destroyed, there would be no God; if for some reason human language ceased to exist so would God.*

I have been challenged with a similar question. "Which came first, God or human beings?" It confronts us with a stark choice. Are we to divorce belief and practice and say belief in the fact of God can be separated from the practice of faith? Or are we to say faith and the practice of faith must be inseparably linked?

To separate belief and practice makes the object of belief meaningless. So I reject questions which attempt to force me in to saying that God is either real or imaginary, fact or fantasy, because they attempt fatally to separate belief and practice. Even within the classical Christian story, there would be some hesitation in accepting the premise of these questions. God, it would be said, is not an object of belief like other objects but the ground of faith, not a being but beingness itself. To be objective about God, it would be said, is to make God into an idol. In God we live and move and have our being. Even within the classical Christian story, it would be pointed out that God is first and last, that for God there is no before or after. God sees all times at one and the same time.

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The choice is not between a real God and an unreal God. The choice is this. Either we live with the divorce of faith from practice, the divine from the human, the soul from body and meaning from performance, or we bring faith and practice together, living with everything - beauty, truth, meaning, the self, even reality itself - put into the relational, cultural world of human practices.

God, self, history and book are bound in an intricate relationship and how we speak of God cannot be divorced from the way we speak of the rest of life. Belief in God is the exploration of that intricate relationship within the context of a practice of faith. First there is God, the character in the stories of God, recorded in the scriptures of the faith and brought to life in the performance of its rituals. To engage with God is to engage imaginatively with these stories. The character of God varies hugely. Indeed we are engaging with different "Gods" and different characters. Sometimes God comes across as tyrannical, sometimes as generous. Our engagement may be critical or accepting. We may argue with God, dethrone God or obey God. All these are possibilities as we immerse ourselves in the stories of faith.

But together with the God of the stories of the traditions is the process of engagement, the process described in the chapters of this present book in the making of meaning, the valuing of life in the company of others and the creation of our selves. God is an aspect of this process of human relating and negotiation.

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One charge that is often brought against a radical view of Christianity is that traditional Christian theology has held together both a God "out there" and a God "in us". God, in the technical jargon, is both transcendent and immanent. Equating belief and the fruits of believing, it is claimed, gets rid of the transcendent God. God becomes purely subjective. However for me too there is both God "out there" and God "in us" - God in the stories of the faith and God in the process of engagement. The fusion of these two, the tradition and the process, releases the liberating energy of joyful creativity. Holding the two together is vital. When asked by children "Where is heaven?" "Who made the world?" or "What are angels?" I send them to the stories of faith. I answer in just the way I would about people and places in books. I encourage them to use their imagination to enter these worlds. What would it be like to meet an angel? How do angels wash their wings? What would it be like to create a world? What would you do if you were walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho?

"But are there really angels?" "Is it a true story?" the persistent questioner continues. My answer is to ask what they mean by a real angel and a true story. This is not to avoid answering the question or plunge them in to deep philosophical confusion but because a simple "yes" or "no" answer prevents an exploration into reality and truth and thereby betrays belief. "Well, will I ever see an angel?" or "Have you ever seen an angel?" the discussion continues and we begin to explore who sees angels and what angels do. Once again we go back to the stories of faith and examine the story of Mary's

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visitation and the angels visiting the shepherds before Jesus' birth. Any other answer is faithless in that instead of continuing to encourage a process of being involved with the stories of faith, it encourages the stories to be set aside. To live by faith is to live in the stories of faith.

The same creative process needs to go on in facing death. One question asked of so-called "godless vicars" is how they can minister to the dying. What comfort have they to give to the bereaved person who asks if the deceased is in heaven? My reply is to ask what it would mean to the bereaved for their deceased friend to be in heaven? What are they hoping for? And as we begin to explore heaven in the stories of faith, so we explore our own hopes and feelings. To offer any other comfort would be unfaithful. No thoroughly orthodox Christian minister could state that someone was in heaven and assert that they would meet again. To offer such assurances is to release people from the business of having to engage with the stories of faith, the character of God and the stories of their own lives.

For the person who does not feel bound to the practice of faith or to God, the question is "Why bother?" What is the point of getting involved with religious faith? What use is it? And why especially do I, a priest in the Church of England, whose views are said by others to be so at odds with the rest of the church, continue to remain within it?

I use religious stories and rituals because they provide a rich and fruitful environment in which to explore the binding relationship between God, self,

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history and book, between the making of meaning, truth, selfhood and love. In faith I find the energy to engage with the hopes and aspirations of my friends and neighbours. I seek to renew the traditions of the Christian church because they increase my feelings of solidarity with the rest of the world, in which solidarity I am created.

In my parish, people are growing up, looking for work, getting married, coping with illness, unemployment and bereavement. They are concerned about their children's education, their local community facilities and outbreaks of crime and vandalism. Many are working through local groups and voluntary organisations to improve their environment and increase the opportunities for those who are disadvantaged. And there are those whose interest and work in these concerns is at a national and international level.

The rituals of faith are worth bothering with in so far as they fire our imaginations and empower us to work through these very human issues. A contemporary example of human and religious co-operation is that of Amnesty International which over the last thirty years has continued not only to catalogue the appalling abuses of human rights but to actively oppose capital punishment, torture and cruelty to children. The idea of Peter Benenson, a Catholic lawyer of Jewish descent, the organisation has been amazingly effective in working across ideological, religious and racial boundaries. From its beginning it gained support from a wide variety of people including in this country Robert Swann, a Roman Catholic, Eric Baker, a prominent Quaker,

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Paul Oestreicher, an Anglican priest and Bertrand Russell, an atheist philosopher. Many churches have a candle encircled with barbed wire as a constant reminder of those who do not enjoy the same freedom to meet, worship and express their views.

There is a danger in our society of losing the vision of this sort of co-operation. Those of us who practise a faith must put the emphasis upon our communities and encourage ever wider co-operation and understanding. To this end, the rich variety of human faiths, literature and arts provide an abundant resource. And when the emphasis is put upon our common human endeavours, doctrinal concerns diminish and the practice of our faith becomes worthwhile and worshipful.

Faith, the practice of faith and its rituals need to be grounded in such human needs. For the search for God is intricately related to all aspects of life. It concerns the whole exploration of the making of meaning, the creating of value and the growth of ourselves. Those who take part in religious rituals bring to these enterprises the contribution of their different faith traditions. And if religious faith is to survive in the future and if there is to be a peaceful co-operation of the faith communities, then faith must become the servant of humanity. It must be able to show that it has some contribution to make to the pressing concerns of our society.

The one upon whom the Spirit of God is said to rest is the one who preaches good news to the poor, proclaims release for captives, the recovery of sight

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to the blind and sets at liberty those who are oppressed. Those who are said to inherit the kingdom of God are those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison.

W.H. Auden in his Christmas Oratorio *For the Time Being* has the three wise men say,

*To discover how to be human now  
Is the reason we follow this star.*

This is why we bother: to discover how to be human now. And that discovery is the discovery of God. In his *The Time Being*, Don Cupitt writes,

*We should live as the Sun does. The process by  
which it lives and the process by which it dies  
are one and the same. It hasn't a care. It  
simply expends itself gloriously and in so  
doing gives life to us all.*

This is the agenda for faith: to live gloriously and bring life to all.

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"The rituals of faith are worth bothering with", writes Stephen Mitchell in *Agenda for Faith*, "in so far as they fire our imaginations and empower us to work through the human issues" which face us all. "Those of us who practise a faith must put the emphasis upon our communities and encourage ever wider co-operation and understanding. To this end, the rich variety of human faiths, literature and arts provide an abundant resource. And when the emphasis is put upon our common human endeavours, doctrinal concerns diminish and the practice of our faith becomes worthwhile and worshipful".

In Stephen Mitchell's hands, faith becomes a hugely exciting business, challenging our ideas of God, self, history and reality itself.

Stephen Mitchell read music at Exeter University and taught it in a comprehensive school before switching to theology at Cambridge. After a spell as curate at Malvern Priory and as Precentor at Leicester Cathedral, he became Rector of Holy Trinity, Barrow-on-Soar, and St Mary's, Walton-Ie-Wolds, in Leicestershire. He was a founder-member of the Sea of Faith Network and has written in the *Guardian* and contributed to several theological and humanist publications. He was elected Chair of the Sea of Faith Network (UK) Steering Committee in 1995.

*Agenda for Faith* is the second of the Sea of Faith Network's new series of publications. The first, *A Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network*, is available from SoF, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough, LE11 2DT. Details of Network membership and of the quarterly magazine *Sea of Faith* are available from the same address and the Network's website <http://www.sofn.org.uk>.

Agenda for Faith

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