ST MARK'S LIBRARY GAZETTE

ISSUE NUMBER TWO

Contents

Editor's Introduction

Presently, the library is exhibiting on its stands a range of books relating — in broad terms — to themes around social justice, that will hopefully connect with the focus of the 2026 Lent Groups. We continue to add to the library catalogue and a list of books that have recently been included is contained at the end of this publication. Our approach is to seek to provide a *plurality* of perspectives on theology and related matters, befitting of a church that prides itself on its living, *thinking,* loving and inclusive approach to faith. Library use is increasing, with an average of 45 books out on loan at any given time. Library Group members welcome any suggestions for purchasing new books; however, owing to budgetary constraints, we can't guarantee that all of them will be acquired. There is always a member of the Library Group on hand at the 10.00 am service, who can advise users on the library's contents. The Library Group is also keen to support writers who want to publish wider than the *Library Gazette*, and, in the first instance, advice for doing that can be sought from myself. We hope that you enjoy this edition of *St Mark's Library Gazette* as much as we have in producing it.

Submission Guidelines

The focus of *St Mark's Library Gazette*, published on a *bi-annual* basis, is theological, though the articles do not have to be written by professional theologians. They do have to be accessible to the non- specialist, however, and that will continue to be a requirement as we move forwards. The scope of the *Gazette* is deliberately broad, reflecting the diversity of theological opinion within St Mark's church. This is already reflected in the wide range of material available in the Church library. Submissions can be in areas such as Biblical Studies, Church History, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, Contextual Theology, Public Theology (including Political Theology), and can be written from pre-modern, modern and post-modern perspectives, or combinations of these. However, inclusion will require that they do not infringe on the Church's commitment to being an inclusive church.

Should you wish to submit an article for consideration, please send it to me at joe.forde@tiscali.co.uk. It can be up to 2000 words in length (and

occasionally more than that) and references should be done in the Chicago number style. Book reviews are also welcome. Submissions should include a brief biography of yourself (up to 150 words) and, for longer articles, a brief abstract would also be appreciated. Articles should be formatted using the Times New Roman (14) font. Submission of an article or book review does not guarantee inclusion in *St Mark's Library Gazette*, which is at the discretion of St Mark's church. All issues of *St Mark's Library Gazette* are subject to church ministerial oversight and final approval.

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The views expressed in this issue of *St Mark's Library Gazette* are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Library Group, the clergy or the Parochial Church Council of St Mark's church.

Joe Forde,
Church Librarian (job share with Carole Forde)

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The Risen Life – A Fresh Look
Part II

In a previous article exploring the apostle Paul's appreciation of Jesus' resurrection, I suggested that he experienced it as essentially spiritual in nature, form-full yet transcending materiality, enshrining the essence of Jesus, capable of re-embodiment within the lives of believers. I also suggested that, as Paul understood Jesus to be the 'first fruits,' his resurrection illuminates the nature of risen life more generally. In conclusion, I noted that within our Western materialist worldview, describing Jesus' resurrection as spiritual was tantamount to claiming it didn't happen and wasn't real – judgements Paul would have vehemently refuted on the grounds that for him, the spiritual is more 'real' than what we call the material or physical, a conviction shared by some leading thinkers today.[1] In this article, I will attempt to explain why.

We begin with the recognition that everyone inhabits what Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor calls a 'social imaginary' which he describes in these terms:

What I am trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations … I speak of imaginary because I am talking about the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends … the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.[2]

Taylor's social imaginary is comparable in certain respects to popular notions of worldview or paradigm – the 'tinted spectacles' through which we interpret the world, the presuppositions shaping our behaviour, underpinning our judgements, colouring our experience. Crucially, a social imaginary comprises of what we take for granted and rely on in daily living – a sort of implicit orthodoxy. One of the foundations of most Western social imaginaries is physicalism (sometimes called materialism) – the belief (and

it is a belief) that everything within the universe comprises of or is derived from matter. Within such an imaginary, it is not difficult to understand how describing a phenomenon such as Jesus' resurrection, as spiritual is the equivalent to asserting it was immaterial and, therefore, unreal. But what if physicalism is plain wrong or, at least, incomplete? What if not everything in the universe is physical in nature or origin? What if there is something more fundamental even than matter?

Back in 1637, French philosopher René Descartes published *Discours de la méthode* (English: *Discourse on Method*) in which he attempted to establish what can be known with certainty. Through a number of extended meditations, he subjects every aspect of life as we know it to universal doubt, including the so-called physical world which he correctly observed we have no direct access to, but can only deduce through our senses. This is a highly significant acknowledgement which nearly four hundred years on remains largely unchallenged, so it is worth pausing for a moment to feel its force. Consider, for example, a chair, perhaps the one you are sitting on as you read this. How do you know it exists? Well, because you can see or touch or sit on it. If you were so minded, you could lick or smell it or even knock it to see if it made a sound. That is to say, your only access to the chair is through your senses, but what we now know through advances in neuroscience is that our senses supply largely unprocessed 'raw' sensory data, a proportion of which is subsequently interpreted and integrated to form an image of what we call a chair. Paradoxically and counter-intuitively, although what we recognise as a chair appears to be 'out there' it is in fact 'in here,' in our minds.

Now many physicalists and, I suspect, most of us would maintain that our senses supply accurate information about the outside world, but as Descartes would retort, that is an assumption open to doubt and, as such, remains unproven which, in turn, means that the existence of a world outside our brains also remains unproven. In fact, Descartes concludes that the only thing that is beyond reasonable doubt is that I am a thinking person, hence his famous dictum *cogito ergo sum* which can be translated, 'I think, therefore, I am', or equally, 'I am thinking, therefore I exist.'

This, then, begs another vital question, namely, who or what is the 'I' that is capable of thinking? Again, this may initially appear self-evident, but further inquiry demonstrates that consciousness capable of generating thought and

a sense of self capable of serving as the subject of the 'I' are highly elusive and difficult to account for within a purely physicalist paradigm. This is complex stuff, but we need to dip our toes into these deep waters. The problem that physicalism has to account for satisfactorily is how the stuff of the universe is able to generate subjective experience in all its richness? How can inert matter – don't forget, our bodies and brains consist of the same atoms as constitute rocks and steel – generate what Thomas Nagel[3] has coined 'something that it is like to be' – a sense of being 'someone' with an inner life, capable of agency and intention, with access to memories and emotions, proficient in abstract thought and imaginative innovation? Philosopher David Chalmers has framed this as the 'hard problem' of consciousness because it requires something that is wholly unprecedented, qualitatively of a different order from the physical universe, to emerge.[4]

Sometimes properties can emerge within the physical universe that cannot readily be accounted for from the constituent parts. Consider the chemical elements oxygen (O) and hydrogen (H) which in normal conditions are highly combustible gases. However, when combined in a particular configuration to form molecules of water (H_2O), a new property emerges – liquidity. How could two highly combustible elements become wet? Yet they do. Couldn't consciousness and a sense of self emerge in a comparable way? This initially sounds plausible, but on further reflection it becomes obvious that we are not comparing like with like. In the case of water, wetness is a physical property that has emerged from the combination of physical elements. But consciousness and a sense of self are not physical, they are mental phenomena and there is no reason why physical matter in whatever configuration or level of complexity would give rise to them. It would be like claiming alphabetical letters when strung together into words and sentences generate meaning. Self-evidently, they don't; minds generate meaning.

Given there are major problems with emergentism (as it is called), what other physicalist theories for consciousness and a sense of self have been proposed? Broadly-speaking, they fall into three camps. The first is 'epiphenomenalism' which claims that consciousness is simply a side-effect of bio-chemical processes within the brain, with no independent existence or evolutionary utility - one that gives the impression that we are someone, the 'I' in subjective experience, but it is a delusion. We only need to recall Descartes' dictum above to recognise the implausibility of this option. What

is more, it presupposes what it claims to refute, namely that there must be 'someone' to be deluded (you can't delude no one!).

The second is 'panpsychism' (aka Dual-Aspect Monism) which claims that all matter is conscious to some extent or has the potential to be so (panprotopsychism), from sub-atomic particles to homo sapiens and everything in between. This approach recognises the limits of the physical sciences to study the 'outer' aspects of matter, while recognising that there is also an 'inner' aspect that currently lies beyond its reach.[5] Although there is little, if any, scientific evidence for this theory (almost by definition, I suppose), it is the logical corollary of a physicalist paradigm – if there is nothing but matter, then the only way to account for consciousness is to claim that it is an intrinsic property of everything. But many, including many scientists, have drawn attention both to the theory's implausibility (In what meaningful sense is an electron conscious?) and, in the spirit of Karl Popper, to its unfalsifiability (How could one possibly demonstrate that an electron isn't [or, indeed is] conscious?).[6]

'Reductionism' is the third physicalist approach to consciousness and sense of self whereby, without explaining why they emerge from the neural activity in the brain, reductionists assume that they must because, within their social imaginary, there is no other possible source. Nobel Laureate Francis Crick speaks for many: '"You", your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.'[7] A more sophisticated reductionist strategy is developed in neuroscientist Anil Seth's highly acclaimed *Being You*[8] in which he refocuses the debate away from *why* subjective experience arises from physical processes in the brain (cf Chamber's 'hard problem') onto what he calls the 'real problem' which focuses on the recognition *that* it does and attempts to explain, predict and control the phenomenological properties of conscious experiences in terms of underlying neurobiological mechanisms.

Seth concludes that conscious perception (which is only one aspect of consciousness) is a kind of 'controlled hallucination' generated by the brain's best guesses about the causes of sensory input. Not only does this beg the question of whether no one (ie no subject) can experience hallucinations, but it is also difficult to envisage how this approach could account for other

dimensions of consciousness, such as abstract thought, creativity, intentionality, memory, unity of awareness and a sense of self.

Moving on, there are other grounds for calling into question whether consciousness and a sense of being someone can be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of the electro-biochemical processes of brain tissue – the so-called 'firing of synapses.' Here are three anomalies for the physicalist paradigm. Firstly, evidence that calls into question any direct correlation between brain size and normal brain function. There are documented cases of patients with hydrocephaly (fluid on the brain) who exhibit normal mental capacities while, in some instances, possessing no more than 5% of the brain tissue of an average adult. Of particular interest for us is a former student of Sheffield University with an IQ of 126 and a first-class honours degree in mathematics whose skull was almost entirely full of cerebrospinal fluid surrounded by a thin layer of brain tissue roughly one millimetre thick.[9] At the very least such cases suggest extraordinary levels of redundancy and neuroplasticity.

Secondly and related are cases of savants with extraordinary capacities for retaining and recalling information and yet who possess average-sized brains or, occasionally, reduced cranial capacity (microcephaly), suggesting once again either massive underutilisation of brain tissue in most humans or alternative explanations for how brains remember, if indeed that is what they do.[10] What is clear is that, unlike computing and conventional hardcopy storage devices where there is a direct correlation between quantity of information stored and size of storage facility, whether a hard disk or a filing cabinet, no such relationship exists when it comes to human memory.

Thirdly, it has been recognised for some time that taking psychedelic substances such as psilocybin, LSD, DMT induces 'highs' of vivid, intense and, often, overwhelming experiences (some of you may have tried this for yourselves!). Initially, it was thought that these extraordinary experiences could be correlated with increased neuronal activity within the brain. However, in the last decade or so, multiple neuroimaging techniques (EEG, MEG, fMRI) have demonstrated quite the opposite, namely that psychedelic substances significantly reduce activity in multiple brain areas, with no detectable increases in others, thereby raising questions about whether the source of psychedelic-induced highs can be accounted for in terms of the brain's physiology.[11]

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the physicalist account of consciousness and a sense of self comes from the 'measurement problem'[12] – one that is best illustrated by Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment formulated in 1935. In the experiment, a cat is placed in a sealed box along with a small quantity of radioactive material with a 50% chance of decaying within an hour. Also in the box is a Geiger counter linked to a hammer that will be released to break a vial of poison should radioactivity be detected. For the duration of the experiment, the cat remains unobserved. Is the cat alive or dead? There is no way of knowing because no one has access to the hapless feline, resulting in the paradoxical situation that until the box is opened the cat could be both dead and alive – in superposition - which is clearly absurd.

In the case of Schrödinger's cat, few would question whether it continued to be physically present when unobserved. The issue is whether the cat is alive or dead. However, the measurement problem relates not to the macro world of cats and the like described by Newtonian physics, but to the subatomic world of quantum physics. Here the very existence of particles such as electrons or photons is called into question when they are not interacting with consciousness – that is to say, when they are not being measured in some way. Rather, prior to measurement, the location of subatomic particles can best be described in terms of probability – a wave function charting the relative likelihood of where a particle may be at any juncture (the Schrödinger equation). However, it is only at the point of measurement that the wave function appears to collapse as the particle 'materialises.' Unobserved, it is nowhere!

As you can imagine, the implications of this phenomenon are hotly contested, spawning rival theories (eg Copenhagen, Many-Worlds, Pilot Wave, Objective Collapse, Quantum Decoherence), some of which go to extravagant, if not incredible, lengths to dismiss the role of consciousness in any account of the subatomic world. Perhaps the most excessive is Hugh Everett's Many-Worlds interpretation[13] which posits that the wave function describing the location of subatomic particles never collapses, with particles concurrently existing at every point along the curve in a seemingly endless cascade of branching universes. These other universes are unobservable which means that there is no more empirical evidence for their existence than there is for the location of the unobserved particle on Schrödinger's wave function – the phenomenon it is attempting to account for.

So where does this leave us? Caught in something of a paradox, I think. Most of us inhabit a social imaginary, a worldview, which is grounded in the belief that nothing exists apart from matter, forces and fields – physicalism. However, our sense of being someone is essentially mental in nature and, although we often express our experience of being someone through our bodies, there are good reasons for doubting that the two are coterminous, namely, that our bodies are wholly responsible for generating our sense of being someone. After all, how can physical matter generate subjective experience? In a comparable manner to how meaning cannot be reduced to words on a page or beauty to pigments on a canvas or truth to the contents of an equation, so being 'me' cannot be reduced to physics and biochemistry. As least, that's my instinct for now.

Yet, having said that, whatever constitutes this surplus of me-ness, it clearly has an intimate, symbiotic relationship with our physical bodies and their concomitant processes. So intimate that it would be difficult to envisage how it could be said to exist outside of that relationship. Perhaps, it is for this reason, as we explored in the first part of this paper, that the apostle Paul, when considering the afterlife in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, doesn't envisage a soulish, disembodied mode of being, but rather a transformed bodily one where the body (*sôma*) consists of spirit (*sôma pneumatikon*) rather than the stuff of earthliness (*sôma psychikon*). Can this spiritual embodiment be said to exist? Formally speaking, not really, because existence is a property of the physical universe with its inherent contingencies. Yet, if our investigations have disclosed anything then it is surely that our truest intimation that there is another dimension to being, one that transcends the physical, may prove to be our enduring sense of being someone.

Notes

[1] For example, Bernardo Kastrup, Iain McGilchrist, Henry Stapp, Keith Ward, Eugene Wigner.

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 171-72.

[3] Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review* 83 (1974), pp. 435–50.

[4] David J Chalmers, 'Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (1995), pp. 200–19.

[5] Galen Strawson, *Things that Bother Me: Death, Freedom, the Self, Etc* (New York: New York Review Books, 2018), pp. 130–53.

[6] Hedda Hassel Mørch, *Non-physicalist Theories of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 47–67.
[7] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 3.
[8] Anil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (London: Faber, 2021).
[9] Roger Lewin, 'Is Your Brain Really Necessary?' (reporting the research of the late British neurologist, John Lorber), *Science* 210 (1980), pp. 1232–34; also Donald R Forsdyke, 'Wittgenstein's Certainty is Uncertain: Brain Scans of Cured Hydrocephalics Challenge Cherished Assumptions,' *Biological Theory* 10 (2005), pp. 336–42.
[10] Donald R Forsdyke, 'Long-term Memory: Scaling of Information to Brain Size,' *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014), pp. 1–4 (Article 397); also *idem*, 'Samuel Butler and Human Long Term Memory: Is the Cupboard Bare?,' *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 258 (2009), pp. 156–64.
[11]Bernardo Kastrup & Edward F Kelly, 'Misreporting and Confirmation Bias in Psychedelic Research,' *Scientific American,* 3 September 2018.
[12] For non-technical accounts, see Stephen M Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 227–52 and Adam Becker, *What is Real? The Unfinished Quest for the Meaning of Quantum Physics* (London: John Murray, 2018), pp. 13–20.
[13] Hugh Everett, 'Relative State Formulation of Quantum Mechanics,' *Review of Modern Physics* 29 (1957), pp. 454–59.

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Abstract

A possibly well-earned critique of liberal Christians is that they are confident about what they *don't* believe in, but more reticent about a 'Gospel to proclaim'. The article provides a positive personal statement of liberal faith. While facing the level of agnosticism that a rational person must keep hold of, and while not minimising the perceived inadequacies of theology endemic within current Church denominations, the statement asserts a strong level of *trust* in the goodness of the ultimate source of creative freedom in the universe, in the wisdom and rightness of the 'kingdom values' embodied in the life, death and aftermath of Jesus, and in the many-sided collective life of the Spirit-guided Church community. It concludes with some suggested practical consequences for the life of the Church and hopes to initiate discussion of the issues for today's Church.

Liberal Theology

The criticism of liberal Christians has always been that they talk much more easily about the things they *don't* believe in than the things that they do. Well, what about the Garden of Eden? Did Abraham, Moses or King David even exist? The virginal conception of Jesus? Jesus as Son of God and a third member of the Trinity? The cross as atonement for all humanity? Revelation as a prophecy of the world's end? Satan? Angels? Heaven? The Creeds? God answering prayer? Then there are the Christian historical 'sins' we are becoming more and more aware of: compromises with politics and violence, misogyny, homophobia, antisemitism, abuse of the vulnerable, colonialism or anthropocentric environmental exploitation. That's already quite a list of things that some or all liberal Christians don't believe in or positively reject, and one could add more to that. The question then arises: just what can survive such a tsunami of suspicion? How can a liberal Christian still claim that name?

I have consciously selected a set of things that have been part of historic Christian faith and practice, but that I personally, along with other liberal

believers, have either come to reject or to interpret in a quite different way. Of course, many Christian commentators down the ages have been able to air questions about the traditions and practices they were heir to, and the tradition itself has been able to incorporate many new insights, but still, for me, tough questions remain:

Am I in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Is there anything left of a faith worth following for the liberal Christian believer? Where do I place my trust?

My answer, unsurprisingly, will have a threefold shape.

God as source of being

There are two things about the world, as I experience it, which point to something/someone that is its source, sustainer, essence and goal and is worth the name God.

The first thing is not so much the vastness and multiplicity of the universe, glorious as that is, but just *the sheer fact that anything exists at all*. A very big fact requires a very big 'explanation'. Science may or may not be able to tell us ultimately how this universe 'works' but that will never be able to replace the sheer, overwhelming realisation that *things are* and they might not have been. I think that all prayerful meditation eventually leads to the absolute wonder and awe that *I am* and *everything is*. That experience can be called a primary awareness of God. But it remains also in deep unknowing. The Christian mystics speak of a 'cloud of unknowing' or a 'deep and dazzling darkness' as they strive to come closer to God, and, for all their conviction of faith, they know that there is no way through - yet.

The second awareness that leads for me towards a sense of God is the absolute *openness* of the universe, a world of time and space, chance and necessity, where everything is always in motion, where every situation has potential and where even the past keeps looking different as we move away from it. That's exciting, but also terrifying: although we get many, many clues about what works and what doesn't work in this mind-boggling

panorama and possibility of life that we have been granted, we have absolutely no idea where it's all heading and what it's capable of producing, whether in glorious outcomes or hideous catastrophes – and that's without even including possible realms beyond mortality. The radical openness of the world guarantees a possibility of freedom to everything that exists, freedom to actualise their being and to free others, or indeed to retreat into a denial of their own potential and towards the destruction of others.

I maintain that it is not irrational to believe that this freedom is provided by a benign source, which/who is both totally at one with all that exists and also 'summons' everything to a completely unknowable end, not in any way fixed beforehand, but still absolutely good. How do I know that? Well, obviously I don't, but I put my trust in the extraordinary, magnificent way in which the universe has been set in motion, and for me the benign source and guarantor of the goodness of the ending is 'God'. To say, further, that 'God is love' is, for me, far from the kind of comforting mantra that ignores both the suffering and the incomprehensible vastness of the unfinished universe – so many unanswered questions – but a response with the biggest word we know, however inadequate it is, to match the awesome fact of universal being and freedom.

Jesus of Nazareth

I started with freedom and the sense of the world's wonderful potential, but an equal inspiration for my faith, reinforcing the sense of goodness, is, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. But not the totally idealised, wonder-working, triumphantly glorious Son of God. There *is* wonder and glory in Jesus, but it is a human goodness and heroism that remain subject to all the power-sources of the world, both the political, social and theological ones that sent him to a cross and the literary and theological ones that encased him in a Bible, and yet still point onwards and outwards to that benign source of all.

How does Jesus do that? He does it because, behind and through all the various presentations and interpretations of his life and death in the New Testament, we can glimpse a real historical character who dedicated his public career to the service of others and in 'enacted challenge' to the violent power/religious structures of his society, and who, bringing into strong focus the wisdom and morality of his inherited faith, created a living portrait of

what he called God's kingdom, a community based on mutual forgiveness, sharing, healing and love – a committed willingness to be 'interrupted' for the sake of another's need. The New Testament provides different accounts of the meaning of his death on a Roman cross, but perhaps, at its simplest, it's Jesus' refusal to be turned aside, even in the face of death, from the values of the kingdom, that is, from the right way to live in the open world of freedom, and therefore it's a triumphant vindication of those values.

Jesus' early followers, in an incredible burst of what you might call collective inspired creativity – that is, inspired *by* Jesus – developed beliefs and writings around his short life and mission, picturing him as the Christ, the unique Son of God, miraculously born and astonishingly experienced alive after his death on a cross and, in between, accomplishing many works of wonder and words of wisdom. It's necessary for a rational person of today to be agnostic about claims of miracles and of resurrection – there's simply no way of proving or disproving them – but when I take into account the full harvest of what came to be enshrined in the New Testament, I'm blown away by the sense that there is so much here that a human being needs to live a good life, a life in conformity with the nature of reality, the sort of life in which love triumphs and many good things are brought into being. Is the whole Son of God story, with its many wonders, literally true, or did a real human life, inspiringly good as it certainly was, become transformed into a massive myth or parable through St Paul and the writers of the Gospels, to make its truths, about how the world could and should be, available for all generations to come? Of course, I believe the latter, but, although I think we can be pretty sure of a good many points of historical accuracy in the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early church, there can be no *absolute* certainty at any given point in the story as relayed. I choose, though, in faith to follow the good steps of Jesus as pictured in the pages of the New Testament. It is not foolish to believe that Jesus is our best picture of how to live rightly in the world God has given us. We can rightly acknowledge him as God's word to us.

The Spirit of God

In addition to the 'agnostic commitment' I've just described, I find that the life of the Christian community also gives me solid ground and definite fixed points with which to orient myself. Regular worship, study and prayer at

their best – sadly too often not available in such quality – can enable a Christian to be linked in to an incredibly long history of human witness to a gospel of love, to experience a sense of wonder at the many gifts we have been given, to explore challenging and awkward questions about how we should live and to be urged on towards new chapters, collective as well as individual, as disciples of Jesus. The inspiring stories and ethical dialogues in the Bible – the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament – provide an extremely fertile resource for thinking about the meaning of life and the right way to live. The community of the church can be a testing ground and stimulus towards living in a good way.

It's as though something or someone is always striving to lead the Christian community – and maybe, too, the wider community – away from being stuck in yesterday's world and towards being responsive to the latest challenges of belief or ethics: I would call that the Spirit of God. Sadly, whereas the church has hammered away at individual sin and repentance, it has often been slow to recognise its own institutional captivity to limited and time-bound social and political norms. There has always been a reluctance to keep modelling Jesus' own openness to all, and a refusal to be influenced and changed by what each set of new circumstances brings.

Faith, not Fact – Parable, not Dogma

Because Christianity is a 'historical religion' with Jesus of Nazareth at its heart, there has been an overwhelming temptation to build on the 'history of the universe' as depicted in the way the canon of scripture (Genesis to Revelation) has been arranged, and to turn what was always myth, edifying story and parable (some of it based on historical events) into positivistic history and fact. As in: God created the world; God built up a holy people; God became incarnate to save humanity; God promises salvation to all and will one day end the world, saving those who have faith into his heaven: end of world history. But what is *this* 'faith', the one that will get us faithful forgiven sinners straight into heaven? I am very far from the first to say that a 'faith' that *guarantees heaven* is both a morally corrupting bargain and actually not faith at all, since it has turned a story-based hope for struggling humanity into a dogmatic certitude.

The New Testament *is* full of the requirement to have faith, but its agnosticism tends to be limited to questions about how and when an absolutely sure salvation for the believing Christian will come about. And even the limited agnosticism of New Testament 'faith' was further downgraded towards 'certainty' in the historic creeds. The creeds may have had their ecclesiastical and political uses in defining the parameters of the Christian story, but they represent a further move away from the New Testament's varied and imaginative promises of salvation to those who have faith in Christ.

It's my conviction that it's only with a return to the kind of 'radical agnosticism' I've tried to describe that 'faith' and 'belief' take on their true character as a kind of reasonable but open *trust* in goodness and love – in creation, in Jesus, in community. And in that kind of faith we stop trying to prop up a tired religious story set in a cosy three-decker universe as though it were something solid and 'guaranteed' and instead keep moving forward into God's free world of life and death, following Jesus with hope but into a future which is pretty much unknown.

Consequences

I end with a few of the 'practical consequences' of a liberal theology that I see:

- A real agnosticism fully allows the possibility that 'our liberal views' are not the only repository of truth; more conservative formulations are not to be anathematised, although they can certainly be challenged. Conservative views *can* have good outcomes.
- As we make decisions about how to live our lives, we should keep our minds and hearts open to every source, starting with scripture, Christian tradition and our own experience/reason – but not necessarily in that order and being aware that, as Christians, when we make use of any one of the three, the other two are likely also to be at work.
- Accepting the value of scientific enquiry in a world whose source and ending are still unknown, we still affirm the powerful value of stories, parables and metaphors to express our intuitions of what is wise and good.
- Asking questions of the Bible and being committed to keep wrestling with it are greater signs of love for it than QED-quoting texts.

- Preaching is not about pietist reassurance or spiritual therapy but about naming good and evil more accurately and searching for and telling the good news of Jesus.
- Creeds, even newly created ones, have no place in worship, since they are always a threat of conformity around a bogus certainty.
- Mission is not about conversion or recruitment but about sharing with others in our pilgrimage into the unknown tomorrow and trying with them to engage in the values and practice of Jesus.
- Prayer is not about asking for things but is about keeping our minds and hearts open to God/reality in awe and thanksgiving, admitting our part in the way things have gone wrong, expressing our fears and longings honestly and looking for a way forward to live better.
- A sign of a healthy congregation is their inclination to critique the theological appropriateness in traditional liturgy, hymns and church music. If there are creative ways to reinterpret old formulations of doctrine, they may still speak to some; but many others may be allowed to depart gracefully into the archives.
- It is good for Christians to enter enthusiastically and creatively into the celebration of death, holding the balance between unsentimental realism and hopeful trust.

I offer this short picture of where I find myself as a liberal believer. Is there a role for a church like St Mark's to be more specific about its theological as well as its social and political liberalism? The very word 'liberal' might suggest not – everyone should find their own way – but if St Mark's seeks to offer its life to a wider world, should that not include a liberal theology?

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Abstract

This essay/book review assesses two different contemporary approaches to merit from American authors: Michael Sandel [2] who points out the dangers of tyranny that come with a meritocratic approach, and Heather Mac Donald [with a space!] [3] who argues that race and the pursuit of equity endanger a functioning meritocracy that has been the staple of democratic societies, so that the best people are not necessarily appointed. If Sandel finds a tyranny of *merit*, Mac Donald finds a tyranny of *proportionality*. If he laments loss of the common good, she laments the loss of beauty and the undermining of our heritage. Both are concerned about society, although they have contrasting views. Both are important contemporary thinkers who need to be taken seriously, even though they disagree.

The Tyranny of Merit or Proportionality?

Michael Sandel is the best-known public philosopher. His books reach the best sellers' lists; and he is famous for his 'Socratic' course on Justice at Harvard and for his BBC radio series *The Global Philosopher,* which engages ordinary people from around the world in reflecting on contemporary issues. A new book by him is always something of an event, and he doesn't disappoint with *The Tyranny of Merit*, which challenges the contemporary idolisation of merit that defines the common good by GDP [4] and seeks a moral re-evaluation to encourage a strengthening of social bonds and recovery of the common good. This book contributes to his ongoing work in combating individualism and in defence of societal solidarity.

For Sandel, meritocracy operates like a tyranny for its "sorting machine" [5] creates winners and losers. This is especially true in his homeland, the USA. It elevates the highly educated to such a degree that this elite displays "meritocratic hubris". [6] At the same time, it has created "the politics of humiliation", [7] whereby others (without a college degree) tend to be looked down upon, resulting in the erosion of "social esteem" of most workers and the disempowerment and demoralization of ordinary citizens. [8] In this way, meritocracy has operated as "a recipe for social discord", [9] as predicted by

Michael Young in his 1958 satire. [10] Sandel says that this has led to a populist backlash. [11]

Although Sandel regards rewarding merit, as such, as good, [12] he notes how luck and good fortune, etc., are always involved; therefore, no one totally deserves whatever comes to them, however gifted or hard-working. Although he is often a critic of John Rawls, another famous American philosopher, he agrees in his rejection of merit/desert as grounds for wealth as "their due" given "the moral arbitrariness of talent" plus "other contingencies". [13] Moreover, Sandel clearly points to the "dark side" to the "meritocratic ideal" or "sensibility", [14] which is certainly evidenced by "Credentialism", [15] which he describes as "the last acceptable prejudice, i.e. "disdain for the poorly educated". [16] However, it seems to me that there is also an unacknowledged dark side — more dangerous, perhaps: if arbitrariness and contingency predominate, then responsibility and hard work, agency and talent are demeaned. The consequence: we don't deserve any success or its fruits. Further, the dangers of hubris lurk around and are certainly not reserved for educated meritocratic elites alone, although they are particularly prone to it.

More positively, Sandel suggests that allocations to prestigious US colleges could use a partial form of lottery, [17] but even he acknowledges there would need to be a *merit threshold*. However, he does not deal with the problem of "levelling mania" [18] that is described by Heather Mac Donald — the Thomas W. Smith Fellow at the Manhattan Institute — in *When Race Trumps Merit*, who exposes grave dangers from weakening the use of merit as a standard for college selection, scientific research, and cultural performance (e.g. opera). [19] Not least the rise in mediocrity, and that the most gifted may retreat (this is an argument that Lord Sumption, a former member of the UK Supreme Court, makes about the judiciary). [20]

In his Conclusion, Sandel advocates a third way: he calls for "a broad equality of condition" [21] as opposed to equality of opportunity or outcome. Whilst it's good to see him eschewing the favoured equity argument of our times (equality of outcome), which he regards quite rightly as the "sterile oppressive equality of results", [22] it's hard to see how far what he is

advocating differs substantially from 'equality of opportunity'. However, his emphasis on the social or communal context, rather than on the individual, is worthy of note and it fits in with his advocacy of "contributive justice" (in contrast to distributive), i.e. "an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that go with producing what others need and value", [23] as renewing the dignity of work for all, which he pursues in Ch. 7. I certainly agree with him that in a good society our fellow citizens should be respected and able to lead a life of dignity; [24] and that is clearly jeopardised at the moment, even if it's not quite a tyranny. Indeed, if there is a tyranny, it may be more (to re-work Sandel) a 'tyranny of proportionality', whereby everything is measured by "disparate impact", which creates even more disparate impacts in its wake, as Heather Mac Donald argues.

Indeed, her book could have been entitled *An Analysis of the Devastating Impact of Disparate Impact Analysis on Medicine, Science, Culture, Arts, and Law Enforcement*. She demonstrates how it is misplaced and, indeed, dangerous — in these different social realms vital to our society — to crudely assess matters by measuring racial proportions or quantities. There are no grounds for believing in some simplistic mathematical equation whereby the differing racial proportions of a given society should be reflected at all levels of that society. So, to argue, for example, that there are insufficient Blacks in universities or medicine compared with their proportion in the population could be a spur to remedial action of some kind, but to disrupt operating by merit distorts the system and can only be achieved by some kind of affirmative action that privileges them, which inevitably necessitates de-privileging others, which is the road that the USA, but not the UK, has taken. A classic case is Harvard University which by increasing their Black intake, through strong affirmative action, has consequently reduced its Asian intake, despite the fact that the latter are more accomplished educationally than both Whites and Blacks. In fact, it has led to an appeal to the US Supreme Court. It is surprising, therefore, that Sandel does not engage with this issue, especially given that he teaches at Harvard, but perhaps it is too sensitive, being so close to home. Nevertheless, if you also read Heather Mac Donald matters are balanced out, given that her book could have been entitled *The Tyranny of Proportionality*. No doubt Michael Sandel's book will be more lauded, sell better, and will appeal more to liberal British readers, but

Heather Mac Donald's book is the more hard-hitting and she deserves greater recognition, especially in the UK where her writings remain sadly, relatively unknown. [25]

Notes

[1] Ian K. Duffield & Rob Hoch-Yidokodiltona (eds), *Radical Disciple: The Influence and Significance of John J. Vincent* (Wipf & Stock, 2025).
[2] Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Penguin Books, 2020/2021).
[3] Heather Mac Donald, *When Race Trumps Merit: How the Pursuit of Equity Sacrifices Excellence, Destroys Beauty, and Threatens Lives* (DW Books, 2023).
[4] Sandel, pp. 28f.
[5]Sandel, Ch. 8.
[6]Sandel, pp. 25, 26, 41, 49.
[7]Sandel, p. 26.
[8]Sandel, pp. 18, 29, 30, 73f, 88, 96, 198, 200f.
[9]Sandel, p. 30.
[10]*The Rise of the Meritocracy* is a satirical novel by British sociologist Michael Young, see Sandel, p. 30. For those who want a recent satire, that presents something of an opposing scenario, could do no better than to read Lionel Shriver's novel, *Mania* (The Borough Press, 2024), which demonstrates the social disorder and tyranny that results from the abandonment of merit.[13]
[11]Sandel, Ch. 1.
[12]Sandel, pp. 33f. Although life itself is often arbitrary and full of contingencies doesn't mean that some elites are able to somehow undo this situation; in fact, ironically, attempts to do so are bound to be arbitrary and full of contingencies themselves.
[13]Sandel, p. 142.
14] Sandel, pp. 34f, 39ff, 116ff.
[15]Sandel, Ch. 4.
[17]Sandel, pp. 184ff.
[18]Mac Donald, p. 61.
[19]See Mac Donald, Ch. 1 (on medicine), Ch.2 (on science), Chs 3–5 (on classical music), Ch. 6 (on opera), Ch. 7 (on drama), Ch. 10 (on museums), Ch. 11 (on art).
[20]Jonathan Sumption, in *Law in a Time of Crisis* (Profile Books, 2021).
[21]Sandel, p. 224.
[22]Sandel, p. 224.
[23]Sandel, p. 206.
[24]Sandel, p. 225 (citing R.H. Tawney).

[25]See, for example, Heather Mac Donald, *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture* (St Martin's Press, 2018). This earlier book is something of a companion to her latest.

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Abstract:

In understanding the Gospels in their own historical context and conceptualising Christ as an oppressed radical, Latin American Liberation theologians championed a 'preferential option for the poor', encouraging oppressed peoples to critically analyse the systems that sustained their poverty. Through their re-examination of Christianity's core values, liberating theologies have sought to replace a Church of power and control with one of service and solidarity. These 'radical' ideas have their own complex histories and have evolved significantly since their initial British reception, with reactions existing on a broad spectrum from state surveillance and tabloid derision, to postmodern reconsideration, to philanthropic and political inspiration. This article serves as a summary of my MA dissertation arguments, but mainly as an opportunity for reflection on what has been learned both in terms of the movement itself, and those it has touched. Ultimately I argue that academic interpretations of Liberation Theology as purely a theological or political movement are insufficient in understanding its legacy in a British context, as is the overreliance of

theologians and historians alike on familiar source bases that occlude the multiple receptions and impacts of the movement.

Liberation Theology in Britain: Exploring Alternative Histories

Born out of the extreme poverty and violence of military regimes and Cold War-era oppression, Liberation Theology was a call for a comprehensive overhaul of theological and pastoral frameworks. Based on a hermeneutic conceptualization of Christ as an oppressed radical, proponents of this emergent theology espoused a 'preferential option of the poor', a reinterpretation of scripture that protagonised marginalised peoples living in poverty. Perhaps the most influential Liberationist in the Latin American context was Gustavo Gutierréz, whose seminal text *Teología de la Liberación* (1971) as well as his prolific career thereafter, established him as 'the father of Liberation Theology'.[1] Despite the primacy of Gutiérrez' work, he was undoubtedly not the only Liberation theologian espousing these views. There was in fact a pantheon of progressive theologians across the continent and beyond developing a series of liberating theologies. Works such as those of Jon Sobrino, James Cone and Leonardo Boff each refined liberating praxis in their own theopolitical contexts, developing a self-critical 'hermeneutic circle' that would help to establish what Gutiérrez would call 'a permanent cultural revolution'.[2]

While this iteration of the movement developed by Gutiérrez and others like him was inherently Latin American, Liberation Theology was deeply entrenched in globalised systems of inequality and wider historical context. The transnational character of episcopal conferences, such as those at Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979, combined with global historical developments, such as The Cold War, The Civil Rights Movement and various revolutions of Latin America and beyond, meant that the relevance of the Liberationist message was heard at a time of increasing international solidarity amongst oppressed people.[3] Liberationist ideas developing in the Americas were received around the world, by both other Global South nations, and by the marginalised peoples of the Global North, including those in Britain.

In the case of a British Liberation Theology, as the context of the UK is markedly different from that of Latin America, there are several components

of American Liberationist ideas that could not be transferred easily into a British iteration. For example, the foundation of a base ecclesial community, developing hermeneutic understanding in the broadly rural context of an oppressed Catholic-majority nation, does not translate neatly into a context of a multi-faith urban presence, a Church that was decidedly more middle-class, and a parish structure that had 'failed to adapt to the demographic changes brought about by the industrial revolution'.[4] Gutiérrez himself, when attending theological conferences in Britain, frequently refused to answer the question of what a British Liberation Theology would look like, claiming that it must be conceived of locally.[5]

Scholars writing about British Liberation Theology have grappled with its relevance, the position of the Church in society, as well as the theoretical prerequisites for a uniquely British Liberation Theology. While undoubtedly critical in deepening the theological and historical understanding of Liberationist ideas, they often belie another essential dimension of Britain's relationship with Liberation Theologies, that is, the countless individuals and organisations that have been deeply and continuously impacted by their reach. As the Argentine theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid made evident: 'discourses of liberation have a value which comes not from their textual force, but from the realm of human activity, that is, from the rebellious people'. [6]

It is in this spirit that I undertook this research. Developing an approach that focused more in depth on those individuals and organisations we may call 'practitioners' of Liberation Theology, as well as the movement's treatment by the wider public. I was therefore eager to explore source materials that have been previously undervalued, including Church policy reports and recommendations, archival documents that detail the correspondence of Church and state actors, data taken from the Charity Commission for England and Wales, as well as oral history testimony drawn from interviews with UK-based theologians and activists. [7] I must clarify that this research is more focused on the Latin American ideas; other liberating theologies such as Feminist, Black and Indigenous Theologies are important contributions that merit their own research and will not be treated in depth here.

By exploring the historical reception of Liberation Theology in Britain beyond the more commonplace academic and ecclesiastical voices, the

impact of this movement can be understood in more than just intellectual or theological terms. In conducting this research I have found that Liberationist ideas took on multiple meanings and articulations, with its reception largely contingent on the positionality of the recipient. To account for the multifarious impacts of the movement in Britain is implausible even in an MA dissertation, let alone this article. However, in my research I found there to be a paucity of valuable sources beyond scholarly articles or theological works. The following is merely a sample of these sources that proved useful to my work.

In 1970, a concerned letter from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) arrived at the British Embassy in Bogotá, with an attached article from the French national newspaper *Le Monde.* The article detailed the formation of a new group of 'rebel priests', who had denounced the Church and governments of Colombia and the United States. [8] The purpose of the letter was to ascertain if the supposed leader of the group, Fr. Gustavo Perrez, was the same priest that had been in regular contact with British officials at the embassy. The reply affirmed this, but gave assurance that the article was unfounded and 'discounted all around'.[9] The embassy then sent an account of Perrez' career and political beliefs, namely, his growing anti-capitalist views and whether he could still be classed as a 'reformist' or a revolutionary. [10] The final section of this letter was a recommendation for the embassy to publish some material on cooperative agriculture that would help to moderate the more radical views of, according to the letter, those like Perrez 'of whom there are very many among the thinking people of this continent'. [11] This interaction is one of several I found in my research, and while correspondence between a handful of diplomats does not speak for the entirety of the British state, these documents do offer some insights into the way the Marxist elements of Liberation Theology created a sense of unease for British government officials, who maintained a concerned, surveillant distance from the movement.

A similarly valuable means of interpreting the early receptions of Liberation Theology is through examination of popular faith organisations and their publications, more focused on the practical application of Liberationist ideas and how they could shape faith-based activism. One such movement is the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Between 1965 and 1975, in response

to a global environment of 'revolutionary student unrest', the SCM departed from pure theology, seeking to address issues in the secular world. [12]

In January 1973, the SCM sponsored the Seeds of Liberation conference in Huddersfield. The three-day event was designed to provide a platform for Christians to explore their spirituality in political contexts and invited members of the clergy, laity, political activists and academics to share their views and experiences with faith and social justice. In an interview for this research, one attendee of the conference, a student at the time, detailed how at the conference 'there was a lot of discussion about Liberation Theology, particularly Gutiérrez and the Brazilian Helder Câmara'. [13] The same attendee went on to work for decades in South East Asia for BRAC, a development and education organisation, reporting that for them and their colleagues, Liberationist ideas have been essential in their work.'[14] Evidently, while the SCM conference of 1973 was not explicitly organised to explore Liberation theology *per se*, its presence was tangible, part of a wider international dialogue that promoted the necessity to address injustice against a global backdrop of revolutionary and radical Christianity. This speaks not only to the relevance of this conference, but equally to the value of these grassroots movements and events as a source base for understanding the larger trajectory of Liberationist ideas in Britain.

Another valuable historical source is the abundance of newspaper articles that have been digitised and made accessible through online archives. During my research, I found no shortage of Liberation Theology in the British press. By focusing on opposing publications, namely *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian,* both the bipolarity of the British media and political climate, as well as the incongruence of the public and academic perception of Liberation Theology in Britain become clear.

In 1983, The *Daily Mail* published a scathing review of Channel 4's *El Salvador's Crucified Church* (1983), a documentary on Liberation Theology in El Salvador. The review, entitled 'Faith With the Loaded Gun' reduced Salvadoran Liberation Theology to a 'populist cause', denouncing the movement as a 'deformed theology', while claiming that the rise in Evangelical Protestantism in the region was due to the ruling class' belief that 'the left wing element in Catholicism is now too strong'. [15] The same critic would return two years later, with a relatively balanced review of BBC

One's *The Holy City* (1986), reporting that the drama was moving, but contained 'more than a touch of…that left-wing trend in Christian theology underscored by Marxist influences'. [16] These reviews are just one example of the several articles about Liberation Theology published in the *Daily Mail* in the 1980s, with the coverage frequently overemphasising the threat of its Marxist components, and generally focusing on the more scandalous developments in the movement's history.

Contrastingly, The *Guardian* was more positive in its coverage of Liberation Theology and at times saw it as an applicable solution to the crisis of British inner cities in the 1980s, giving a voice to its British proponents that felt it had been 'deliberately channelled to the edges of Church life.'[17] From as early as 1980, journalists from the *Guardian* were suggesting the movement was a 'return to the real meaning of Christianity' and condemning the Catholic Church for upholding the status quo. [18] While these publications diverged significantly in their coverage of Latin American Liberation Theology, both the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* communicated the tense and antagonistic political climate in which their articles were produced and represent a valuable yet often overlooked resource in the understanding of British Liberation Theology's history.

One final example of Liberation Theology's impact that is not often explored in academic literature, is the profound impact the movement has had on faith-based charitable giving in Britain. The most visible manifestation of this is likely the establishment of the Church Urban Fund (CUF) in 1987. The fund was created as a direct result of the landmark publication *Faith in the City* (1985), which had as a key part of its theological priorities, Latin American Liberation Theology. [19] The fund originally aimed for a charitable expenditure of £4 million per year for 18 years, listed in one fundraising directory in 1990 as the 18th largest grantmaking trust in the country. [20] The fund emphatically exceeded this initial target, continuing in the present day to provide grants to a diverse range of both faith-based and secular programmes, with its most recent expenditure (at the time of writing, November 2025) totalling £3.4 million. [21]

While undoubtedly one of the larger examples, the CUF is just one organisation that has benefitted from Liberationist ideas as part of its

charitable objectives. In combing through data from the Charity Commission for England and Wales, many organisations whose origins and grant making enshrine the same Liberationist values as the CUF and the *Faith in the City* report become apparent, with a conservative estimate of £20 million in charitable expenditure in 2024 alone. A full treatment of these varied organisations and the nuances of their theological priorities is impossible and the list is by no means exhaustive. However, their existence and in some cases their substantial economic size, is a tangible example of the way in which Liberationist principles have had a persistent and lasting effect on British civil society, highlighting the value of non-academic sources in piecing together the story of Liberation Theology in Britain.

Overall, through consistent analysis and recontextualisation, academics have provided crucial literature that has deepened the understanding of this movement considerably since its inception. However, much of the scholarship is still preoccupied with the relevance or applicability of Liberationist ideas, as well as what may qualify as a British Liberation Theology. While critical reflection and the intellectual development of these ideas by historians and theologians alike represent an integral part of the history, scholars must equally understand them as only one facet of the narrative. Investigation of the often fluid definitions that Liberation Theology has assumed as it transitioned from a Latin American context to a British one, as well as its varied outcomes in British theology and wider society is essential. This is best achieved by interrogating a broader range of source types beyond academic theology or ecclesiology, with less rigid theological definitions. In doing so, the quality of these sources reveals that, whether it is compatible or not, Liberation Theology had and continues to have a tangible presence in Britain, one whose study necessitates a broader approach than the Church or University alone cannot provide.

If you are interested in reading this research in its entirety, the full dissertation is available on the Urban Theology Union's website. If you would like to discuss these ideas or reach out to the author, feel free to send an email to: rhardy280@gmail.com

Notes

[1] Eddy José Muskus, *The Origins and Early Development of Liberation Theology in Latin America : With Particular Reference to Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Carlisle, 2002) p.11.

[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación* (Lima, 1971; repr. Salamanca, 2022). p.91.

[3] Steve Striffler, *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left in the Era of Human Rights* (London, 2019) p. 95.

[4] Mark Corner, 'Liberation Theology for Britain', *New Blackfriars*, 38.1 (1988), pp. 62–71 (p.64).

[5] Denys Turner, 'Liberation Theology in Britain Today', *Political Theology : The Journal of Christian Socialism,* 2.1 (2000), pp. 64–79, (p.65).

[6] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London; New York, 2000), p.21.

[7] All oral testimony was collected in line with The University of Sheffield's Ethical Approval, any interviewees named in this dissertation are done so with informed consent.

[8] The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FCO 95/943, Publications: Church Affairs in Colombia; FCO to British Embassy in Bogotá, 2 February 1970.

[9] TNA FCO 95/943, Publications: Church Affairs in Colombia, British Embassy in Bogotá to FCO, 20 February 1970.

[10] TNA FCO 95/943, Publications: Church Affairs in Colombia, British Embassy in Bogotá to FCO, 26 February 1970.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Kenneth Boyd, 'The Witness of the Student Christian Movement', *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 31.1 (2007), pp. 3–8 (p.6).

[13] Attendee of the Seeds of Liberation Conference, interview with author (19 August 2025).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Mary Kenny, 'Faith with the Loaded Gun', *The Daily Mail*, 26 September 1983, p.25.

[16] Mary Kenny 'The Gospel According to Glasgow', *The Daily Mail*, 1986 p.24.

[17] Martyn Halsall, 'Onward Christian Soldiers?' *The Guardian*, 28 August 1981.

[18] Jan Rocha, 'Liberation Theology: Latin America's Exotic Way with Religion and Politics', *The Guardian*, 16 April 1980.

[19] For more on the significance of the Faith in the City report, see Joseph Forde and Terry Drummond's edited collection 'Celebrating Forty Years of Faith in the City'. I owe a great deal to the authors for their contributions to my research.

[20] TNA AT 132/12, 'Living Faith in the City', report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advisory Group on Urban Priority Areas, Church Urban Fund Report to the General Synod, January 1990. Section 4.1.

[21] Church Urban Fund, *Annual Report 2023* (August 2024) Charity Commission for England and Wales Charity Register, https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search [Accessed 12 August 2025].

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Abstract: This article introduces *'Curating Spaces of Hope'* as an idea and way of responding to crises shaping our lives and our communities today, which is radical and open to all. The case is made in three phases. The first phase explores the lived experience of unemployment of the author, and his response which took the form of personal and then shared search for hope. The second phase locates this search within the Temple Tradition of public theology and situates Curating Spaces of Hope as updating this tradition for the 21st Century. The third phase considers what it means to be radical in our response to the crises we face in terms of our own position as ordinary citizens, a hopeful orientation, our engagement with theology, and a recognition of our ability to share hope within our communities institutions and across society. The article ends with an invitation to join a search for hope.

Curating Spaces of Hope

In 2008 the global financial crisis affected the whole of the Western world. Markets crashed, and unemployment soared, with the impact felt by those who were in the most precarious positions. Whilst this was taking place, I was looking to graduate from university. I had a dream of going into the oil industry but as the financial crisis closed in, the careers advice I was given was to get a *'temp job'.* When I graduated in 2009, I found work in a sport shop. However, before long they had to let me go due to market pressures. I was unemployed for three months, which was personally devastating to my mental health and self-esteem. In early 2010 I secured a job as a sales

assistant in a petrol station where I worked for 10 hours per week over two shifts. I had found my job in the oil industry, but it was not as I had hoped it would be. During this period, the irony of my circumstances was not lost on me. My expectations had been shattered by things that were largely outside of my control. I was left with the realities of finding my way in the world, a responsibility we all have, and contending with the question of what it meant to be made in the image of God and to live in a way that honoured that. The scope of the faith I'd grown up with was wholly inadequate for the imminent reality I was facing. I remained in this role for nearly 4 years.

This is where my search for hope began and the seeds for what became known as Spaces of Hope, were planted. There are many more details about the personal journey I went on, which can be found in Chapter 3 of *Curating Spaces of Hope* [1] which maps my journey over 15 years from 2010 to 2024 from the ages of 21 to 36. These details include stories of further crises in my own life but, crucially, map the transition from a personal search for hope to a shared search. One might reasonably ask why go to such lengths to set this out? An entirely reasonable question. One answer is that by critically engaging with our own circumstances we can raise our consciousness of what is happening to us and how we might respond - we will have our own ways of doing this - this is mine. Another answer is that by sharing hope we can draw attention to the glory of God and deepen in our relationship with him. The apostle Paul wrote:

"We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."[2]

It was in 2016, during this shift to a shared search for hope that Spaces of Hope emerged. Spaces of Hope are not singular, they are plural. They emerge from and are incarnated by the differences we are all made from as part of creation. These spaces manifested initially as experimental dialogue gathering in cafes and community centres, listening as different experiences were shared and narratives were formed and stories were told. The Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in 2018 characterised it as:

"bringing together innovative mixes of civil society actors – from professional community practitioners through to individual community activists – to 'meaning-make' as a response to experiences of pointlessness and emptiness in personal, community and professional life".[3]

People were talking about different things that gave them hope. Our narrative was about rooting relationships in things that last. From these dialogues came desire to serve people and to work towards healthier and more hopeful communities and relationship with God in whatever form that took. Our mantra was, *'If it is in the root then it is in the fruit and by their fruits you will know them.'[4] 'By their fruits you will know them'* is the penultimate refrain from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 7. [5] The spaces that were being curated at this time were in diverse contexts; from statistically speaking one of the most depressed communities in the country, to Cathedrals. The former Bishop of Stockport Rt Rev Libby Lane reflected on her experience of Spaces of Hope as follows:

"Spaces of Hope brings together all our different parts and elements into a shared public space to be able to discuss openly and fully with one another, each from our own experience and belief base and world view and with our expertise, in order to discover how we best care for one another … I think the opportunities for Spaces of Hope are almost endless because they will be necessary and valuable in every community, potentially"

From 2016 to 2020, 40 Spaces of Hope gatherings took place with around 1000 people from across civil society in the northwest of England. A decade earlier I had been unemployed, before becoming a sales assistant in my local petrol station, and was searching for hope in what I felt were impossible circumstances. In joining a search with many others, amidst burgeoning crises, hope emerged and manifested in a number of ways, including the formation of a new paradigm and methodology for faith based organisation [6] in the Temple Tradition of public theology - I will turn to this below. The search for hope continued and saw experimental dialogues between citizens grow into a paradigm and methodology that was recognisable to citizens and communities as well as different institutions around the public square in the UK and USA - this work is ongoing. I have set out the roots of Spaces of Hope in this way to show the intuitive and incarnational nature of what has

emerged. This provides the basis to develop the case for Spaces of Hope as both a radical movement of hope which *anyone* can join in with, and a possible means of sharing hope and transformation across the communities and institutions that make up society in response to the crises shaping society today.

The call to be radical in this way requires some attention. To be radical is to return to or to consider one's roots. That is literally the Dictionary definition of radical: *"Of, belonging to, or from a root or roots; fundamental to or inherent in the natural processes of life".[7]* By this definition Spaces of Hope is a radical movement. There are many examples from history that can support a move for radical solutions to the uncertainties that shape society in a given age, in a way that engages people, communities, institutions (including the church) and society. In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, William Temple; as Bishop of Manchester (1921-1929), Archbishop of York (1929-1942) and Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-1944), was engaged in such a search. In 1940 he offered radical ways to approach reconstruction after the Second World War. In *The Hope of a New World* Temple wrote:

"Nations exist by God's providential guidance of history and have their part to play in his purpose … if there is to be any approach to a brotherly fellowship of nations … it must be by the same method of so organising their relationship to one another".[8]

Without wishing to become too specific about what the outcomes might look like, Temple recognised that the roots of hope and transformation should be common for people relating to one another as they are for the constructs that we use to frame our world. This view is underlined by the consultative methodology that Temple became famous for, which can be found in Temple's 1942 publication *Christianity and Social Order*. [9] In CSO Temple set out a blueprint for citizen engagement in the welfare state (a term Temple coined in 1928) through the way citizens live healthily and serve one another, in their communities, intermediate groupings as he put it, or civil society organisations as we might know them today including churches, and as part of society. Temple passed away in 1944 and so he never saw his legacy of a citizen engaged welfare state, come to fruition. However, the legacy of his work has been sustained and stewarded by William Temple College (1947-1971) and then the William Temple Foundation (1971-

Present). The Temple Tradition has also been expressed through nationwide initiatives such as the: *Faith in the City Report* in 1985. In the Temple Archives, the following sets out the vision and strategy which launched the Foundation:

"to engage in experimental work in particular disturbance areas in our society, aimed at ... 1) the development of a network of reflective and hopeful change agents; 2) the construction of an adequate understanding and theology for lay involvement in society; 3) a movement for the renewal of the activities and institutions of the church ... A history of this enterprise [reveals] the radical nature of the response which is being sort."[10]

The question has always been how might this work be done for the era in which it is taking place? Lessons can be learned from history, but the responses need to be fit for purpose for today. In March 2025, *Curating Spaces of Hope: Transformational Leadership for Uncertain Times* was published. The Chair of the board of the William Temple Foundation recognised it as *"reinterpreting or even reinventing the Temple Legacy for this century"*.[11]

In April 2025, I curated a gathering rooted at the Inner Temple, London, where we launched an international search for hope with partners at Virginia Theological Seminary (USA), [12] and in August 2025 I took up the role of leading the work of the William Temple Foundation in the north of England to continue the search for hope in the years to come.

To be radical then is a hopeful orientation, it is a theologically engaged endeavour, it is deeply ordinary, and sees the role of every citizen in bringing about change, as well as having clear implications for institutions and society. There are different movements within theology that explore what it is to be radical, which can deepen understanding here. John D Caputo argues that radical theology emerges from the unemployment line. [13] What he means is literal in one sense as he had colleagues who went without work as they thought differently to the status quo. Whilst this was a moral choice based on a defence of their ideas, being radical as I intend it here is not simply theoretical or academic. Being radical is a lived experience of marginalisation which can come about in any number of ways, including

unemployment, and can shape how we experience the world and how we respond to it - I have walked that road. Mike Grimshaw argues that being radical is '*an engagement with the limits of authorities and their limits on the world.*' [14] We don't need to look very far at all to see authority being challenged and the affect it is having on each of us, our communities, our institutions, society, and the world at large. So, the conditions for radical responses are here, it is just a question of whether we consciously engage with them, or not. I have chosen to as part of a shared and growing search for hope. If this search is something you would like to share, and you're moved to do something radical, it would be great to engage in dialogue, and let me encourage you to begin by considering the question, what gives you hope?

Notes

[1]Matthew Barber-Rowell, *Curating Spaces of Hope: Transformational Leadership for Uncertain Times. (London, SCM Press, 2025)*
[2]Romans Ch5. Vs 2-5. (NIV Bible)
[3]Civil Society Futures - The Independent Inquiry 2018.
[4]Matthew Ch7. vs16 & 20 (NIV Bible)
[5]Matthew Barber, *'What is unseen is eternal'*, Magnet Magazine, 121, available at https://ourmagnet.hymnsam.co.uk/articles/121/bible-studies/bible-study-what-is-unseen-is-eternal/ - accessed 14th January 2026.
[6]Matthew Barber-Rowell, *Curating Spaces of Hope: Towards a Liminal, Rhizomatic and Productive Paradigm of Faith Based Organisations (FBOs),* London: Goldsmiths, University of London. 2021
[7]Oxford English Dictionary, 2024
[8]William Temple, *The Hope of a New World, Publisher 1940, p93*
[9]William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order,* Penguin, 1942.
[10]Temple Archive - *College to Foundation: An Outline History of William Temple College from 1947-1976,* p205
[11]Simon Lee, endorsement for *Curating Spaces of Hope: Transformational Leadership for Uncertain Times.* 2025. London SCM Press.
[12]Matthew Barber-Rowell, *Communicating Radical Hope in an era of poly-crisis,* William Temple Foundation Press, Temple Books Series, 2025.
[13]John D Caputo, *Radical Theology,* Publisher, 2020, pp. 20–21
[14]Mike Grimshaw, *'Radical theologies'*, Palgrave Commun 1 (2015), 15032, https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.32

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Abstract

Popular versions of Christianity have little to say about what Jesus spent most of his time doing. However over the last fifty years Jesus scholars have examined how he related to his context, showing that the main issue facing first century Galileans was starvation caused by high taxes. Jesus drew on the Torah, which for its time legislated exceptionally generously for peasants, and the prophetic movement which challenged rulers to uphold its laws. While standing in the tradition of John the Baptist he developed a more collaborative movement aiming to ensure that everybody got something to eat. The evidence comes from the earliest strands of the gospels. Some of these texts have a linguistic character indicating oral recitation, thus providing evidence that movement members were committing themselves to a 'new covenant'.

Jesus, food and God

A young man from a peasant family in a backwater of the ancient Roman empire started a movement. Two thousand years later a third of the world's population are counted as members of it. This is an absolutely unparalleled achievement. How did it happen?

Being from a vicarage family I was brought up with Christianity. Nothing I was taught, either at home or at school or at theological college, could explain it. He was divine, or the Messiah, or God the Son; but there have been many such stories, and not just in Christianity. He walked on water, had

a virgin mother and rose from the dead; but we would want convincing evidence, and anyway why should anyone care two thousand years later?

The human Jesus

In the First Quest for the Historical Jesus, nineteenth century Germans found him a teacher of eternal verities. In the No Quest Schweitzer told us Jesus had forecast imminent divine intervention and was just plain wrong. The Second Quest reopened the search. Around fifty years ago the Third expanded the range of resources by rejecting the presuppositions behind the First.

Eighteenth century secular theory had invented a new concept, borrowing the word 'religion' to separate discourse about God, worship and life after death from the rest of earthly life. Jesus, classified as 'religious', had to be *only* about religion [1] The Third Quest pulled Jesus back down to earth, engaged with what was going on at the time. It draws on the social sciences, especially anthropological studies on peasant societies, [2] thus throwing light on gospel texts and contemporary data like Josephus' histories. The big story that emerges is peasant starvation. [3]

The context

Hunter-gatherers lived in small communities and met each other's needs. They did not leave individuals to starve. Agricultural empires did. Food surpluses were commandeered by kings and used to employ armies and tax collectors. Powerful kings could increase the tax take to the point where just enough peasants survived to do the following year's sowing and harvesting. [4] Peasants would look back to earlier and happier times, but they rarely wrote anything down so we do not normally have records of their views.

An exception was the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Achaemenid Persian empire granted self-government to the small community centred in Jerusalem. Its laws protected the interests of peasants. Jewish peasants therefore had a better quality of life for a few centuries from the Persian until the Roman eras.

One element was the ban on buying and selling land in perpetuity. God, according to the Torah, had given the land to provide adequate resources for everyone. Under the Romans however peasants could sell their land, and were often forced to by debt resulting from high taxes. Thereafter they might stay on the land paying rent to the new owner as well as the ongoing taxes, thus squeezed even harder. The next step down was to become a day labourer, depending on paid work at sowing and harvesting time, otherwise reduced to begging. They did not last long in this state but their ranks were being topped up by others driven into it. [5]

Jesus and John

Jesus began his public life as a disciple of John the Baptist. Like earlier prophets John denounced the ruling class for enriching themselves while driving the peasants to starvation. Jesus developed his own style. While John took his followers to the river Jordan to baptise them, Jesus worked with people in the villages where they already lived. [6] Jesus worked more collaboratively. In one story John sent disciples to Jesus, asking 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus replied:

'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor…'[7]

English translations usually render something like 'have good news brought to them'. English has active and passive voices, describing what people do and what is done to them. Greek also has a middle voice describing what people do for themselves. This is the case here. A more precise translation would be that the poor 'bring good news to each other', thus matching what the blind, lame, leprous and deaf were doing. While modern Christians want Jesus to be the active healer, Jesus himself credited the suffering communities themselves for their achievements. [8] It was a bottom-up movement.

Another example is in Mark 6, probably our earliest account of the feeding of the multitude. It contrasts the lavish birthday party for Herod Antipas, where John's head was brought in on a platter, with the desperation of the

hungry people outside. I, and perhaps you, can only imagine what it is like to be desperately hungry and expect to be equally hungry for the rest of our lives. Those peasants had pinned their hopes on John and were distraught.

English translators usually continue along the lines of the King James Version: ‘there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat’. So why not eat something? The Greek literally means ‘the times were not good for eating’. In other words there was a famine. [9] Their leader had been killed. They had pinned their hopes on John: now they would pin their hopes on Jesus.

Mark’s theology lets us down. He seems to have believed Jesus was inaugurating a physically different new age: as well as feeding a multitude he could walk on water and calm a storm. Later Matthew and Luke, recognising Mark’s mistake, omitted his theology.

Still, Mark’s words provide a clue. Jesus’ first response to the crowd was to ‘teach them many things’. [10] *What* things we are not told, but Jesus invited them to get together in *symposia*, discussion groups. They did not. Instead they formed *prasiae,* rows of students facing a teacher. [11] The crowds wanted him to be their new teacher; he wanted them to talk to each other. John had invited his followers to blame the ruling classes and expect divine intervention; Jesus wanted them to discuss what they could do together.

The Jesus Movement

Jesus will have engaged mainly with peasants still on their own land, free to take part in his movement but threatened by the slippery slope to destitution. Within each village people knew each other: who had done a favour which was not repaid, who had lent money and was still owed it. Jesus argued that they should put aside their disagreements and focus on making sure everybody got something to eat. Thus the central petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are for daily bread and the cancellation of debts.

The evidence comes from the earliest parts of the gospels. Mark is one. The other is ‘Q’, the parts of Matthew and Luke that agree with each other independently of Mark. Some have described the movement as an attempt to ‘renew Israel’ with a revived covenant. Traditional covenants with gods had three elements: why they were committing themselves to that particular god,

the laws they were to obey and the sanctions for disobedience. In the Ten Commandments and Joshua 24 Israel's covenant with its god had these three elements. In the Sermon on the Mount and Luke's equivalent we find all three again. [12]

The first affirms the god of Israel as the one who blesses:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.[13]

Peasants had learned either to blame each other, or to blame themselves, or to give up all hope. Instead they were to see themselves as the people God was blessing. This did not make them well-fed but it did restore their confidence as the ones approved by God.

The second element is the laws:

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do-good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.[14]

The commands were designed for the village. The peasants' difficulties were shared by their neighbours so they should forget about past resentments and make sure everybody got something to eat. [15]

The third element appears in both Matthew and Luke in the parable of the house on a rock. [16] Unlike most traditional covenant sanctions it does not threaten divine punishment; it simply points out that for the new movement to work it must be based on a firm commitment.

Today when groups of people share a commitment they can create an organisation with a constitution, a membership list and a written record of decisions. Oral societies, unable to do this, establish regular gatherings to recite them. [17] Some of these early gospel texts are of this oral type. [18]

Food for the hungry

So in the name of the god who provides generously for everyone they came together, bringing whatever food they had, and made sure everybody got their share. They reaffirmed their commitment to the new movement, perhaps chanting or singing those gospel words. To stay positive, rather than complaining about the Roman taxes, they thanked God for the gift of food. They called this practice of theirs their 'thanksgiving' – in Greek, 'Eucharist'.[19]

Conclusion

This article has summarised how recent scholars have described the movement begun by Jesus. Why is it not better known? Mainly because governments do not like it. They prefer to help themselves at the expense of the powerless. They can choose religious leaders more to their liking. Over the centuries the tradition has been reinterpreted to suit them.

Still, the original movement turned into the biggest social movement in human history. Realistically its success cannot be explained by one divine person magicking up food for a crowd or rising from the dead. I suggest it is better explained as addressing the moral challenge facing every human society in every age: to share resources so that everybody gets what they need. To follow the way of Jesus today, churches do not need a prayer of consecration over bread and wine. What they need is a food bank.

Notes

[1] A classic text is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion,* London: SPCK, 1962. See also Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A history of a modern concept,* Yale: Yale University Press, 2013.

[2] Jesus scholars have been influenced by the works of James C Scott, e.g. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* Yale: Yale University Press, 1990.

[3] The main sources I am drawing on are Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, Bruce Longenecker, Douglas Oakman and William Herzog II. A summary is Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine,* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2021.

[4] Gerhard E Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966. For a focus on the Roman empire see the works of Peter Garnsey, e.g. *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[5] William Herzog II in Richard A Horsley, Ed, *A People's History of Christianity Volume 1: Christian Origins*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005, 51; Sean Freyne, *Jesus: A Jewish Galilean*, London & New York: T & T Clark, 2004, 45.

[6] Scholars still debate whether Jesus, like John, foretold an imminent end of the age. During the course of the Third Quest the pendulum has been swinging away from this view.

[7] Matthew 11:2-5, cf. Luke 7:18-22.

[8] Luzia Sutter Rehmann, *Rage in the Belly: Hunger in the New Testament*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2021, 40-42.

[9] *Oude phagein eukairoun*, Mark 6:31. Rehmann, *Rage*, 11.

[10] Mark 6:34.

[11] Literally, *prasiae* are rows of vegetables in a field. Other uses of the word for students facing a teacher date from a little later, but this must be the meaning here. Rehmann, *Rage*, 236-8.

[12] Richard A Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

[13] Luke 6:20-21. Most Jesus scholars think Luke's text comes closest to what Jesus said, as Matthew did more editing. However these commitments were probably repeated over and over again with varying wording.

[14] Luke 6:27-28.

[15] Richard Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*: Eerdmans, 2013, 127.

[16] Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:48-49.

[17] Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus*, p. 87 & *Origins* 12.

[18] Richard A Horsley, *Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008, 103.

[19] Our knowledge of the past mainly comes from the literate, who rarely starve. There is no evidence, either from texts or from art, that the first generations of Christians modelled the Eucharist on the Last Supper. Yet by the end of the second century Christian authors were explaining it this way – thus mistaking the Last Supper for a First Supper. Paul F Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, London: SPCK, 2004, 13; Richard H Hiers and Charles A Kennedy: 'The bread and fish Eucharist in the Gospels and early Christian art', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 1976: 3, pp. 21-23.

Author: John Schofield is a retired Anglican priest who has been part of the St Mark's community since 2012. Having spent the latter part of his active ministry in clergy and Reader ministry training, formation and development, he has contributed to St Mark's' life through coordinating (and writing)

materials for Lent groups and other study and learning opportunities. He was for three years the Chair of St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity and when that closed down led on the development of the CRC Online website, whose materials have now been incorporated into the resources section of St Mark's website to which he continues to contribute. As well as having served in four parishes, two diocesan posts and as a residentiary canon at Guildford Cathedral, he also worked in various capacities for Save the Children UK in the early years of this century.

Three Poems

Decay

also inspired by the dead willow painting

The decay is a glorious colour,
reminding that not all decay is bad.
In the beauty of the tree's decay
insects and bugs find their food
and are sustained.
As I get older
the body decays
slows down
and gives me time
to open myself more to you
to be open more for others
that they too may find nourishment
from what I have learned
through the passing seasons of my life:
some glorious in the sunshine
some sprouting in the rain
some covered by the winter snow
some already disappeared from view
but present in the mist of memory
that often turns to fog,
but which, giving way

shines a clearer light
on what to avoid
on the path that lies ahead
for them
for me.

Depletion

I see a bottle lying on its side.
It is the bottle I use for watering my plants.
But it reminds me
that the same firm produces
fizzy drinks in cans
which I rather like.
But then I turn to thinking
about where the tin comes from.
How many millions must be produced each year.
And though some might be recycled
how much depletion of minerals,
of earth’s resources,
is represented there?
Can we afford to carry on blithely?
What changes are we required
to think about,
to act on?
And do we have the strength,
the will,
the courage,
to do anything
except continue,
thoughtlessly,
guiltily,
to enjoy the drink?

Right?

How do I know if I've got it right?
Framed within the search for 'the more'

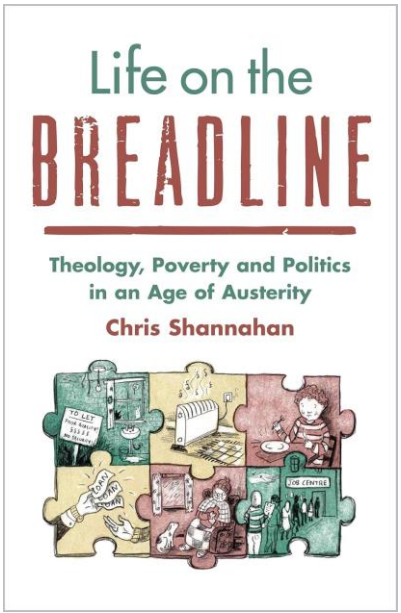
it is valid, I think.
Framed with terms of the religious
it's much more difficult.
So many contra indications,
even within the life of the church,
especially within the life of the church.
It's unsettling.

The apophatic,
the Via Negativa,
is so elusive.
Or is it just the lack of discipline,
the failure to give time,
the inability to calm the wild hawk of the mind,
even the construction of these Pieces,
that creates the elusive?

I want to practice the presence of God more,
but I lack something,
not sight, not assurance.
Is it feeling?
Wanting to sense something more visceral
in the weak attempts at silence?
Will more conscious use
of snippets of silence
be, become more fruitful?
I must not despair,
rather trust that through the ill disciple,
through the absence in the silence,
I may touch that 'more'
and be somehow satisfied.

Book Review

Life on the Breadline: Theology, Poverty and Politics in an Age of Austerity
Chris Shannahan
SCM Press, 2025, 226 pp., pbk, £26.00.



Drawing on detailed in-depth empirical fieldwork across the UK, 'Life on the Breadline' was as a three year (2018-2021) research project that analysed the nature, scope and impact of Christian engagement with urban poverty in the UK, set in the context of the austerity drives stemming from the 2008 financial crash. It was also the first academic, theological analysis of Christian *responses* to UK poverty during that period. [1] Chris Shannahan was a core project team member and the project's lead researcher. In this book, he provides an authoritative, accessible and illuminating exposition of the theological influences that shaped the project, and that he argues have sown the seeds of an austerity-age theology of liberation. He also provides a summary of the project's core findings.

In chapter 1, he analyses the, 'nature, causes and impact of contemporary poverty' (p. 4). Chapter 2 focuses on the project's methodology; what Shannahan describes as, 'the 'nitty-gritty' grounded approach to

hermeneutics' (p. 5). In chapters 3 to 6 he analyses four approaches to Christian engagement with austerity-age poverty. The first, is what he calls the 'Caring' approach, which emphasises the Church as being a servant community, motivated by a theological vision of the common good and human flourishing as central to meeting the needs of those experiencing poverty. The second, is what he calls the more politicized 'Campaigning and Advocacy' approach, which he connects with God's 'preferential option for the poor' and, 'the framing of the Church as a liberative movement called to speak truth to power' (p. 6). The third, is what he calls 'The Self-help and Enterprise' approach, which emphasises self-reliance and aspiration as being key motivators necessary for transcending poverty. The fourth, is what he calls the 'Community Building' approach, that sees the Church as 'a companion community' and that emphasises 'grassroots solidarity and relational Incarnational spirituality as the building blocks for a holistic engagement' (p. 6) with poverty and its causes. In chapters 7 and 8, he draws on the arguments he has developed to begin to shape what he calls, 'the methodological and thematic foundations for an austerity-age theology of liberation' (p. 6). A key theological theme running through his analysis is that poverty is structural; hence, systemic in its origins and causes. This is in line with the way Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of Roman Catholic liberation theology, in his seminal work of 1971:'A Theology of Liberation', described it as being a result of structural sin. Thus, while Shannahan acknowledges, 'As individuals we are accountable for our actions and decisions' (p.18), he argues we are not accountable for, 'the structural injustice that limits our opportunities and the choices we make' (p.18). Therefore, from his perspective, in an age of austerity, a credible theology of liberation must, 'move beyond flawed analyses that divorce poverty from its structural roots and apolitical visions of the common good' (p. 18). Hence, for Shannahan, poverty *is* political, and, for an austerity-age theology of liberation to be credible and effective, it must be a *political* theology, capable of speaking truth to power and of bringing about changes that address the structural causes of poverty.

Shannahan sets his analysis in the period of austerity that began in the UK in June, 2010 with the austerity budget, passed by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, that saw significant cuts to public expenditure,

including to the funding of the Welfare State. This, and later legislation, such as the Welfare Reform Act of 2012 that brought in cuts to welfare benefits, resulted in a deepening of inequality and a consequential rise in poverty levels. From Shannahan's perspective, 'such policies rupture the social fabric of British society and a shared commitment to the common good' (p. 21). Indeed, he sees poverty as, 'an insidious form of violence that can suffocate the life out of us.'(p. 22). In the struggle to overcome and eliminate poverty, Shannahan is unambiguous in his view that *each* of the four theological approaches to tackling poverty which he examines, have a role to play in shaping our response to it; hence, a role 'in the forging of a new austerity-age theology of liberation' (p. 199). However, he is more sympathetic to the 'Community Building', 'Caring', and 'Campaigning and Advocacy' approaches, than he is to the 'Self-help and Enterprise' approach, seeing the latter as being capable of deepening, 'inequality by addressing individual poverty without challenging the structural injustice that causes it' (p. 120). Shannahan's analysis is particularly strong in the skilful way in which he handles the historical contribution that Christian theology has made to tackling and reducing poverty. In this regard, his summaries of the contributions that traditions such as Catholic Social Teaching, the Social Gospel Movement, Christian Socialism, Christian Realism (of the kind espoused by Reinhold Niebuhr, Archbishop William Temple, Ronald H. Preston and John Atherton), and, more recently, the Christians on the Left movement, are informed, accurate and relevant. Again, he is of the view that all of these traditions can and should contribute to sowing the seeds of an austerity–age theology of liberation, and offers suggestions for how this might be achieved. He also touches on the British Liberation Theology tradition developed by Revd Dr John Vincent at the Urban Theology Unit (later renamed as the Urban Theology Union) in Sheffield, though with important contributions from Professor Chris Rowland and others. I would have liked to have seen more on the contribution that urban theology has made (and can make) to the alleviation and reduction of austerity-based, urban poverty. However, this does not in any way reduce my admiration for the comprehensive way in which Shannahan's analysis covers so much ground, in ways that are clear and apposite.

Shannahan concludes the book by identifying a number of challenges he considers are essential for developing and sustaining a, 'rigorous and contextually authentic austerity-age theology of liberation and [to] ensure its traction within and beyond the academy' (p. 199). These cover *inter alia* the work of the theologian, the church, the role of charities, the need for theological reflection, the need for a more proactive and sustained commitment from all participants in poverty alleviation by engaging in the political arena and with political purpose, and a need for solidarity to become a key feature of this movement for change. Roman Catholic values that place an importance on every person's dignity, agency and the capacity for achieving solidarity in the field of human endeavour, feature prominently, in what is a call for action. As he puts it: 'For the sake of all whose lives have been lost to the slow systemic violence of austerity-age poverty there can be no more delay' (p. 206).

Shannahan has produced an important book on poverty, especially poverty caused by austerity, and the consequences for those who experience it, as well as on possible ways of overcoming it. It is a book that is based on a considerable amount of qualitative and quantitative research, which has benefited from a project group methodology that has been characterised by a multi-disciplinary approach to its information gathering and analysis. I have no hesitation in recommending it to all who share an interest in poverty, its causes and consequences, and possible ways of overcoming it.

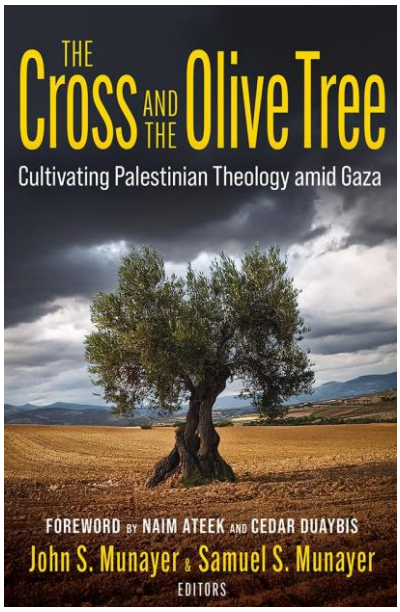
Notes

[1] 'Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st Century City, a Report for Policymakers in the UK', is available for download via a Google search.

Joe Forde

Book Review

Review: The Cross and the Olive Tree; Cultivating Palestinian Theology amid Gaza. Ed. John Munayer and Samuel Munayer. 2025. New York: Orbis.



This edited collection of essays by established and emerging Palestinian theologians tackles some really powerful questions about Palestinian Contextual Theology (PCT). It also conveys theological insights from Palestinian Christians constructing hope as a response to events in Gaza.
In the Introduction John and Samuel Munayer [1] use an extended metaphor of olive oil to define the need for Palestinian theology to support the current context of Palestinian life. Firstly, theology must provide the local Church with the anointing oil of guiding and sanctifying its response to its context. The Church is tiny in size but it is a powerful witness to life in Palestine, it materially supports the education and healthcare of large numbers of Palestinians. The oil of theology must be a 'soap' protecting the local Church from imported Exceptionalism theology that would deny its life. Palestinian theology must also be lamp oil, light to individual Palestinians daily, recognising their suffering and grief and affirming them in their living witness to God's sovereignty.

The essays focus on theology for Palestinians. In the Introduction and other essays the contribution to PCT of founders, Naim Atteek and Mitri Raheb, is recognised, while the focus they established is challenged. As 'new'

theologians, some authors in this collection question a continuing emphasis on disputing Zionist biblical readings to justify claims to land. The suggestion is Western Christians cannot be indulged in their need for theology 'justifying' a better future for Palestinians. There is also challenge to seeking approval of academic rigour from the Western academy [2]. The collection shows a deliberate pivot away from appealing to external Western Christians to Christians in the Global South.

A key text cited by authors is Rashid Khalidi's *The Hundred Years War on Palestine* [3] which supports the guiding historical analysis applied to their theology. Khalidi defines the Palestinian experiences as victims of a Settler Colonial project; the settlers want the land of the indigenous population and their project is to replace the indigenous people in the land. Authors here see settlers' [4], and their supporters' strategies, as common to other 'replacement' settings. These have three elements: settlers claim they are worthier of land ownership; they apply controls to reduce the life opportunities of indigenous people and demonise them to a wider audience; the settlers systemically eradicate the indigenous people's culture, beliefs and future hopes. The writers of these essays and their theologies challenge one of these vectors of oppression of indigenous Palestinians. In my view, three essays in particular provide powerful insights for US and European Christians on the faith response of Palestinian Christians to lived experience of oppression.

The first essay is *Imagination in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; a Palestinian Christian Perspective* [5]. The author provides theological insight into the use by Palestinians of imagination as a bridge between Christ's Kingdom, instituted by the Resurrection, and its final fulfilled order on earth. Imagination is a theological response to Israeli attempts to deny positive future visions of Palestinian life. Imagination is used for claiming a positive future; Palestinian architects are imagining and designing new villages to replace those depopulated or destroyed by ultra-Zionists.

Imagination can also disrupt the Israeli Zionist narrative that the 'replacement' of Palestinians as a people in the land is inevitable. Here disruptive imagination can take the practical form of organised lament that gives grief a natural outlet and in so doing cuts off despair. Lament channels feelings of grief when an order of peaceful relations and respect between

communities is subverted or obscured to give control to a dominant party. The example given is the Jerusalem funeral of a murdered Palestinian journalist, Shireen Akleh. The funeral used lament to affirm continuity of communal life in Jerusalem, and witnessed Christian unity through the ringing of the bells of every Jerusalem Church. Imagination can envision an alternative life; this catalyses action to change the existing order.

The second essay *Palestinian Theology of Martyrdom* [6] provides a theological insight on martyrdom as peaceful, life affirming, resistance to Israeli state oppressive laws and behaviour. After analysis of martyrdom in Christ's ministry and its mirror in the early Church, the authors develop a view of martyrdom praxis in contemporary Palestine. Martyrdom should be a community self-giving response to oppression, not an individual project. The fact that there are few Church members does not affect the impact of self-giving; the outcome of community witness is disproportionate to numbers. Christian martyrdom also shares common themes with Muslim Shahada martyr theology, [7] which creates opportunities of inter religious dialogue. This praxis of daily living is a witness of hope, which opposes any measures designed to deny a continued Palestinian life in historical Palestine, and refuses to hate Israeli Jews.

The third essay that has relevance to a Western Christian readership is *Reconciliation as Co-Resistance; A Redemptive Vision.* [8] The Jerusalem-based Palestinian author, who engaged with Jews and Palestinians in reconciliation work, applies practical experience of intercommunity and interreligious reconciliation building. His experiences leads him to a typology of three scenarios to examine reconciliation. In the first scenario, Jewish reconcilers refuse to give up a Zionist outlook that does not trust or offer an alternative future to Palestinians. There is no reconciliation. In the third scenario, which is clearly guided by a theology of reconciliation, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian participants gain reconciliation by rejecting structural oppression and power imbalance. They share power, and it is Palestinian leadership that is key new relationships. However the second scenario offers lessons to Western Christians when choosing which 'peace' organisation is authentic. In this scenario Jewish Israeli reconcilers want changed, more equal, relations with Palestinians. However, reconciliation fails, because they cannot offer up the certainty of their privilege and the societal controls behind it. The author's message for Palestinians is stark. Palestinians cannot

morally refuse being party to authentic reconciliation; if they do, they will be applying the power dynamics that are currently being used against them. These essays are useful entry points to some key changes in focus for Palestinian theology.

Marc James

Notes

[1] Samuel Munayer, writer of a number of Palestinian theological studies i and father of John Munyaer a Jerusalem based Palestinian theologian engaged in interreligious peace and justice work.

[2] I am confident of this as a guiding theme for this essay collection because the books editors have developed the theme in more detail in a recent paper; John Munayer and Samuel Munayer. Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices. (Studies in World Christianity 28.3 (2022): 287–310).

Their critique of 'Coloniality' the see evident in Palestinian Liberation Theology is of the bias in the writing to address a western audience as well as use western epistemology.

[3] Rashid Khalidi. 2020. The Hundred Years War on Palestine. London: Profile Books.

[4] The term settler in this review refers to the dominant incoming racial/ national group who displace a local population in Settler Colonial models of population change.

[5] Lamma Mansour. *Imagination in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; a Palestinian Christian Perspective. The Cross and the Olive Tree; Cultivating Palestinian Theology amid Gaza. Ed. John Munayer and Samuel Munayer. 2025. New York:Orbis.*

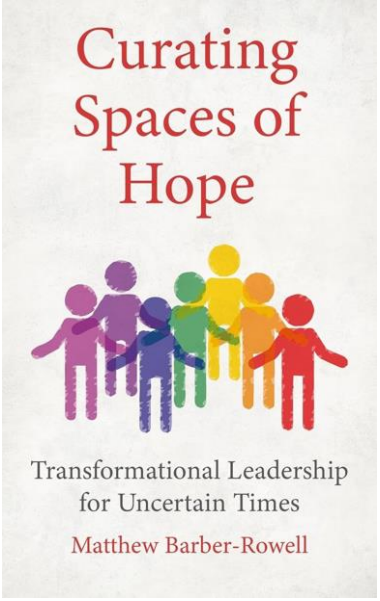
[6] John Munayer and Samuel Munayer, Palestinian Theology of Martyrdom. Munyaer, J and Munyaer. S.2025 ibid.

[7] Life affirming self-giving, a world way form the nihilistic death martyrology of religious extremism.

[8] Daniel Munyaer. Reconciliation as Co-Resitence; A Redemptive Vision. Munyaer, J and Munyaer. S.2025 ibid.

Book Review

Curating Spaces of Hope: Transformational Leadership for Uncertain Times (London: SCM Press, 2025), by Matthew Barber-Rowell



We live in a period of rapidly changing times. The Post-World War II, rules-based international order is breaking down. Neo-liberalism, globalisation, multilateralism, freedom of movement are now being challenged by populist movements, such as Trumpism in the USA and Reform in the UK, that are promoting economic and political nationalism, bilateralism, stand against freedom of movement, and military spending is increasing. We have also seen rises in the number of pandemics, poverty, wars and the adverse effects of human induced climate change, as well as a breakdown in the political 'consensus' that had been emerging on the best ways of tackling the challenges it poses to our planet and our ways of life. Dr Barber-Rowell's book offers a basis for transformational leadership for these uncertain times.

By drawing on the writings of thinkers such as Archbishop William Temple (1818-1944), and the Italian, political theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), Dr Barber-Rowell maps out a values-based approach to what he calls curating Spaces of Hope, arguing that differences should not be used to divide, to separate and to alienate, but to gather, to unite, to curate, to co-create and to celebrate within public spaces and the public square, which are increasingly diverse and beset by crisis' (p. 3).

Dr Barber-Rowell has experienced periods of feeling hopeless in his life resulting from different crises, including periods of unemployment. He recounts these experiences with admirable candidness and thoughtful reflection. At such times, he has drawn on his Christian faith, which has provided him with a sense of hope and purposefulness. However, Dr Barber-Rowell is mindful of how hope is a virtue that is accessed by those of other faiths and beliefs; a point that he clearly develops in chapters 4, 5 and 8.

For Barber-Rowell, being without hope means there is little that can be achieved. Hope is a source of motivation, vision, purpose, enabling one to set a course for one's life. Hope is also something to share and experience with others; hence, the need, as he sees it, to curate Spaces of Hope that enable this to occur. He defines hope as personal hope; that is, his own experience of it based on an evolving Christian perspective, as that is his world view. Yet, hope is also something to be shared; hence, to be drawn from different perspectives from people who have different world views to his own and who operate in different spheres of life. Hope is also rigorous and resilient, 'co-created through a dialogue between our lived experiences and our world views and can be used as the values we use to guide however we live' (p. 3).

Values underpinning curating Spaces of Hope also include unity; Barber-Rowell draws on Temple's recognition of the importance of unity, not least being in oneness with Christ as a foundation for changing our lives for the better, as well as the need for unity movements that go beyond a purely faith-based approach. Justice is also essential for curating Spaces of Hope, and this includes the need to solve the challenges posed by poverty and its structural causes. Hope also has to be authentic and radical in its scope for delivering the changes that are needed, and for shaping the leadership that is required for this. As such, hope, for Barber-Rowell, is a *living* hope that is, 'present through our lived experience' (p. 189).

At a time when many of us are in despair at the national populist influences that geo-politics in the West has experienced over the last few years, resulting in a rise in racism, xenophobia, polarisation of perspectives, growing levels of intolerance and discrimination, and a general sense that we may not have learned sufficiently the lessons of history, not least the origins and causes of the two World Wars, I found this book to be a beacon of hope

and an important contribution to finding a way forward for all who believe in a better world.

Joe Forde

New acquisitions into the library

New books in the library from 29/9/24 to 26 January, 2026:

1. Anderson Jeff, Maddox Mike - Graphic Bible A
2. Haig Matt - The Midnight Library O
3. Maguire Patrick and Pogrund Gabriel – Get In K
4. France-Williams A.D.A. – Ghost Ship K
5. Ritchie Hannah – Not the End of the World K
6. Boas Simon – A Beginner's Guide to Dying J
7. McGuire Bill – Hothouse Earth K
8. Davies P, Brooke G, Callaway P – The Complete World of the Dead Sea Scrolls A
9. Pope Francis – Hope N
10. Drummond T, Forde J – Celebrating Forty Years of Faith in the City F
11. Newell J P – Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul F
12. Olusoga David – Black and British K
13. Varden Erik – Healing Wounds F
14. Parkinson Jacqui - Threads through the Cross Q
15. Markides Kyriacos – The Accidental Immigrant N
16. Baxter Elizabeth – Holy Rood House Community Prayer G
17. Martin Henry – The Dog Walker's Guide to God F
18. Young Martin – Arthur's Call J
19. MacCulloch Diarmaid – Lower than the Angels, a history of Sex and Christianity D
20. Williams Rowan – Passions of the Soul F
21. Mullally Sarah – Rooted in Love G
22. Moser/Meister – The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience H
23. Ó Tuama Pádraig - 44 Poems on Being with Each Other Q
24. Jones Aled – Forty Favourite Hymns Q
25. Gant Andrew – Christmas Carols from Village Green to Church Choir Q
26. Barton Mukti – Wrestling with Imperial Christianity P
27. Brown Brian – Apartheid South Africa! Apartheid Israel? K
28. Parsons Rob – A Knock at the Door N
29. Rogerson W – An Introduction to the Bible B